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The Gunmaker of Moscow

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Old wood to burn! Old wine
to drink! Old friends to trust!
OLD BOOKS TO READ





THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

CHAPTER I.

THE GUNMAKER AND THE MONK.

The time at which we open our story is mid-winter and towards the close of the seventeenth century. Russia had passed through the long and bitter ordeal of national Night. The Tartar yoke had been worn till the very bones of the nation were galled ; and when this was thrown off civil dissensions and insurrections commenced. The Poles and Swedes plundered the country, and amid general tumult and confusion some half dozen men were clamoring for the throne. At length a few patriotic citizens, pledging everything they held dear on earth to the cause of freedom from this curse of anarchy, and headed by a noble prince and an humble, patriotic butcher, made a bold stand to save the country. Moscow was retaken, and Michael Romanoff was chosen Czar ; and this illustrious family still occupies the imperial throne. And now the day of Russian greatness dawned ; but the sun was not fairly up—the broad light opened not upon the empire—until Peter came to the throne.

In the department of the Sloboda—the suburbs of Moscow—and very near the river Moskwa, stood an humble cot, the exterior of which betrayed a neatness of arrangement and show of taste that more than made up for its smallness of size. Nor was it so very small in fact, but only in contrast; for near at hand about it stood many large, shabby, dirty-looking structures that overlooked the prim cot, as bleak mountains may look down upon a verdant hill. And within, this cot was as neat as without. The two apartments in front, one of which was only used in winter, were furnished not only with neatness, but with a fair show of ornament and luxury. Back of these were a large cooking and dining-room, and two small bed-rooms; and back still from these was an artisan's shop, and other out-buildings. This shop was devoted to the manufacture of firearms, mostly. Some swords, and other edged weapons, were made here upon special application.

The gunmaker now stood by his forge, watching the white smoke as it curled up towards the throat of the chimney. He was a young man, not over three-and-twenty, and possessed a frame of more than ordinary symmetry and muscular development. He was not large—not above medium size—but a single glance at the swelling chest, the broad shoulders, and the sinewy ridges of the bare arms, told at once that he was master of great physical power. His features were regular, yet strongly marked, and eminently handsome; his brow, which was full and high, was half covered by the light brown curls that waved over it; while his eyes, which were of a bright, brilliant, deep gray in color, lent a cast of genius to the intellect of the brow. His name

was Ruric Nevel. His father had been killed in the then late war with the Turks, and the son, leaving his mother with a sufficiency of sustenance, went to Spain soon after the bereavement. There he found work in the most noted armories; and now, well versed in the trade, he had returned to his native city to follow his calling, and support his mother.

Near by stood a boy—Paul Peepon—a bright intelligent lad, some fifteen years of age, who had bound himself to the gunmaker for the purpose of learning the art. His hair and his eyes were darker than his master's, and if he possessed not so much sound intellect, he did surely possess an unwonted degree of keen, quick wit, and a principle of unswerving integrity.

The sun had been some time below the horizon, and the only light of any consequence that made things partially visible within the shop came from the dull blaze of the coals on the forge, as Paul ever and anon bore down upon the brake that moved the bellows. Suddenly Ruric started back from the forge as his mind broke from the deep reverie into which he had fallen, and having bade his boy to see that matters were all properly disposed for the night, he turned towards the door, and was soon in the kitchen, where his mother had supper all prepared and set out.

Claudia Nevel was a noble-looking woman, and the light of her still handsome countenance was never brighter than when gazing upon her boy. She had seen the snows of fifty winters, and if they had left some silver upon her head, and some age-marks upon her face, the sunshine of full as many summers had left

her with a thankful, loving heart, and a prayerful, hopeful soul.

"It is snowing again, faster than ever," remarked Paul, as he took his seat at the table.

"Ah," returned Ruric, resting his knife a few moments while he bent his ear to listen to the voice of the storm, "I had hoped 'twould snow no more for the present. The snow is deep enough now. And how it blows!"

"Never mind," spoke the dame, in a trustful, easy tone, "it must storm when it listeth, and we can only thank God that we have shelter, and pray for those who have none."

"Amen!" responded Ruric, fervently.

After this the trio remained some minutes silent, seeming to be busy in listening to the storm-notes that came pealing about the cot. The wind was high, and the snow now came dashing upon the windows with a dreary, melancholy sound. The meal was at length eaten, and the table set back, and shortly afterwards Paul retired to his bed. It was his wont to retire early, for he rose betimes to build the fires and prepare for the labors of the day.

Ruric drew his chair close up to the fireplace, and leaning against the jamb he bowed his head and pondered again. This had become a habit with him of late. Sometimes he would sit thus during a whole hour without speaking, or even moving, and his mother did not interrupt him, as she supposed he might be solving some mechanical problem that had arisen to bother him. But these fits of thought had become too frequent, too lengthy, and too moody for such a hypothesis, and the good woman was forced to believe that they

were caused by something more remote than the business of the forge or the lathe. The youth now sat with his brow resting upon his hand, and his eyes bent upon the hearth. For half an hour he had not moved, and his face wore an anxious, troubled look.

"Ruric, my son," spoke the mother, at length, in a low, kind tone, "what is it that occupies your thoughts so much?"

The young man started and turned his gaze upon his mother.

"Did you speak to me, my mother?" he asked, after having recalled his mind to things about him.

"Yes, my boy," she said. "I did speak to you. I asked you what it was that occupied your thoughts."

As she spoke thus she moved her seat close to where Ruric sat, and placed her hand upon his arm.

"Tell me, my boy," she added, in a low, persuasive tone, "what it is that dwells thus upon your mind."

Ruric reached out and took his mother's hand, and having gazed for some moments into her face, he said:

"I was thinking—and I have been thinking much of late, my mother—of—of—Rosalind Valdai."

Claudia Nevel started as she heard that name, and for the while the color forsook her cheeks.

"What, my dear boy—what of her have you thought?" she asked tremulously.

"What, but of one thing could I think, my mother? You have seen her?"

"Yes, Ruric."

"And you have marked the grace—the loveliness—the surpassing beauty of the noble girl?"

"I know she is beautiful, my son; and also that she is good—at least, so I think."

"Then what but love could move me with deep thought of her? Oh, my mother, I do love her. I love her with the whole strength of my heart and soul."

"Alas, my Ruric, she will never dare love thee."

"You know not that," the youth quickly replied, his eyes burning deeply, and his open brow flushing. "Did I not know she loved me, be sure I would never have allowed my thoughts such range. We were children together, and even then we loved. Fate has dealt differently by us in the years that have passed since those childhood times; but yet I am sure her love for me is not changed, save as increasing age must change all the emotions of our natures into deeper, stronger lights and shades."

"But think, my boy: You, a mere artisan; she, the offspring of nobility and the ward of a duke—a stern, cold, proud aristocrat, who looks upon people of our station only as harsh masters look upon their beasts of burden. I fear you will find little else but misery in such a course of thought."

"At least, my mother, I will see Rosalind; and if she loves me as I love her, and if she would accept my hand—"

"Hush, my boy. Do not cherish such hopes. Why should she mate with thee when the richest nobles of the land would kneel for her hand?"

"Hold," cried Ruric, starting to his feet—his handsome face flushed, and his bright eye burning. "Speak not thus,—at least, not now. I flatter not myself, but I claim a soul as pure, and a heart as noble, as any man

in the land. My mind is as clear ; my hopes are as high ; my ambition as true to real greatness, and my will as firm, as any of them. If Rosalind seeks the love of a true heart, and the protection of stout arms and determined success, then I fear not to place myself by the side of any suitor in the land. But if she seeks immediate wealth, and the glitter for some high-sounding title, then—ah, I know she does not. But let it pass now ; I will see her.”

Claudia would not oppose the wishes of her son, and she said no more upon the subject. For a while nothing further was said, until Ruric remarked upon the increasing force of the storm.

“ Hark !” exclaimed his mother, bending her ear in a listening attitude. “ Was that a knock upon our door ?”

“ Surely no one is out on such a night that could seek shelter here,” continued Ruric. “ You must have—”

The youth did not finish his sentence, for at that moment the knock came so loud that it was not to be mistaken. The youth caught up the candle and hastened to the door. He opened it, but the blast came roaring in, whirling a cloud of snow into Ruric’s face, and extinguishing the light at once.

“ Is there any one here ?” the gunmaker asked, bowing his head and shielding his eyes from the driving snow with one hand.

“ Yes,” returned a voice from the Stygian darkness. “ In Heaven’s name let me in, or I shall perish.”

“ Then follow quickly,” said Ruric. “ Here, give me your hand. There—now come.”

The youth found the thickly-gloved hand—gloved with the softest fur—and having led the invisible applicant into the hall, he closed the door, and then led the way into the kitchen. As soon as the candle was re-lighted Ruric turned and gazed upon the new-comer. He was a monk—and habited something like one of the Black Monks of St. Michael. He was of medium hight, and possessed a rotundity of person which was comical to behold. He was fat and unwieldy, and waddled about with laughable steps. His huge, black robe, which reached from his chin to his toes, was secured about the waist with a sash of the same color, and the snow, which lay upon his shoulders and back, presented a striking contrast. Ruric brushed away the snow with his own hand, and having taken his visitor's thick fur bonnet, the latter took a seat near the fire.

Before a word was spoken, the youthful host carefully examined his guest's features; and the latter seemed equally desirous of discovering what manner of people he had fallen in with. The monk's face was a peculiar one. The features were very dark and prominent, and almost angular in their strongly-marked outlines. His brow was very fair in mental development, and his eyes were dark and brilliant. The slight circle of hair that escaped from beneath the tight skull-cap which he retained upon his head, was somewhat tinged with silver, though his face did not betray such advanced age as this silvery hair would seem to indicate.

"You have been caught in a severe storm, good father," said the youth, after his guest had somewhat recovered from the effects of the cold.

"Aye—that have I, my son," the monk returned, in a

deep, rumbling tone, "I left the Kremlin this morning, little thinking of such a change. This storm has commenced since I started on my return. About half a mile from here my horse got foundered in the snow, and I left him with an honest peasant, and then started to make the rest of my way on foot; but I reckoned wildly. The driving storm blinded me, and the piling drifts swallowed me up at every dozen steps. My body is not very well adapted to such work. Ha, ha ha! But I saw your light, and I determined to seek shelter here for the night. By St. Michael, but this is a most severe storm! yet you are comfortable here."

"Aye, father, we try to be comfortable," said Ruric. "My mother could hardly survive a winter in some of the dwellings which stand hereabouts."

The monk made no answer to this save a sort of commendatory nod; and shortly afterwards the youth asked:

"Do you belong here in the city, good father?"

"Aye—at present I do," the monk replied. And then, with a smile, he added: "I suppose you would like to know whom you have thus received? My name is Vladimir, and my home is wherever I may chance to be on God's heritage. At present I am residing here in Moscow. There—could you ask me to be more frank?"

Ruric smiled, but he made no direct reply. He was too deeply interested in the face of the monk to enter with much eagerness into conversation. At length the guest asked if he could be accommodated with some sleeping-place, and being answered in the affirmative, the youth lighted another candle and conducted him to a chamber which was located directly over the kitchen.

and which was very well warmed by means of several iron tubes that connected with the furnace below.

"Mother," said Ruric, as soon as he had returned to the kitchen, "who is that man?"

"How should I know?"

"But have you never seen him before?" Ruric asked, in an earnest, eager tone.

"I cannot tell, my son. His face most surely calls up some strange emotions in my mind, but I think I never saw him before."

"And yet he seems familiar to me," the son resumed. "Those eyes I surely have seen before, but to save my soul I cannot remember when or where."

And so Ruric pondered and pondered, but to no avail. After he had retired to his bed he lay awake and thought of the strange face; and all through the night his dreams were but startling visions of the **Black Monk**.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE PROCEEDING.

When Ruric came down in the morning he found the monk already there, and breakfast nearly ready. But little was said during the meal. The monk seemed busy with thoughts of his own, and Ruric was wholly engrossed in studying the strange man's features, and pondering upon the various doubts and surmises that had entered his mind. After the meal was over the monk accompanied the gunmaker to his shop, and there he spent some time in examining the quaint articles of machinery that were used in the manufacture of arms.

Ruric was engaged in finishing a pair of pistols, and for some minutes the monk had stood silently by his side watching his movements. At length the youth stopped in his work and laid the pistol down.

"Excuse me, good father," he said, rather nervously, at the same time looking his visitor in the face; "but I must ask you a question. Where have I seen you before?"

"How should I know?" the monk answered, with a smile.

"Why," resumed Ruric, with some hesitancy, "I knew not but that you might enlighten me. I have surely seen you somewhere."

"And are there not hundreds whom you have seen

in this great city—aye, thousands—whom you might recognize as you recognize me?”

“Ah—it may be so; but not like this. There may be a thousand faces I would recollect to have seen, but not one of them would excite even a passing emotion in my soul. But your face calls up some powerful emotion—some startling memory of the past—which bothers me. Who are you, good father? What are you? Where have we met before? Was it in Spain?”

“No,” said Vladimir, with a shake of the head. And then, with a more serious shade upon his face, he added—“Let this pass now. I will not deny to you that there may be some grounds for your strange fancies; but I assure you most sacredly that until last night I never came in direct companionship with you before;—at any rate, not to my knowledge. You have acted the Good Samaritan towards me, and I hope I may some time return the favor.”

“No, no,” quickly responded the youth; “if you return it, then it will be a favor no more. I have only done for you what every man should do for his neighbor; and so far from needing thanks for my services, I would rather give them for the occasion, for I know of no source of joy so pure and uncontaminated as that feeling in the soul which tells us we have done a good act.”

The dark monk reached forth and took the youthful artisan's hand, and, with more than ordinary emotion, said:

“You touch the harp-strings of the soul with a noble hand, my son; and if any deed of kindness can give me joy it will be a deed for you. We may meet again.

and until then I can only say, God bless and prosper thee."

With these words the monk turned away, and, ere Ruric could command presence of mind enough to follow him, he had gone from the house. The youth wished to say something, but amid the varied emotions that went leaping through his mind he could gather no connected thoughts.

After the monk had gone Ruric returned to his bench and resumed his work. He asked his boy if he had ever seen the strange man before, but Paul only shook his head, and answered dubiously.

"What do you mean?" the gunmaker asked, looking the boy in the face. "Do you think you have seen him before?"

"I cannot tell, my master. I may have seen him before, and I may not. But surely you would not suppose that my memory would serve you better than your own."

Ruric was not fully assured by this answer. He gazed into Paul's face, and he fancied he detected some show of intelligence there which had not been spoken. But he resolved to ask no more questions at present. He had asked enough, he thought, upon such a subject, and he made up his mind to bother himself no more about it, feeling sure that if his boy knew anything which would be for his master's interest to know it would be communicated in due season. So he applied himself anew to his work, and at noon the pistols were finished.

Towards the middle of the afternoon, just as Ruric had finished tempering some parts of a gun-lock, the

back door of his shop was opened and two men entered. They were young men, dressed in costly furs, and both of them stout and good-looking. The gunmaker recognized them as the Count Conrad Damonoff and his friend Stephen Urzen.

"I think I speak with Ruric Nevel," said the count, moving forward.

"You do," returned Ruric, not at all surprised at the visit, since people of all classes were in the habit of calling at his place to order arms.

The count turned a shade paler than before, and his nether lip trembled; but Ruric thought that might be the result of coming from the cold into a warm atmosphere. However, he was soon undeceived, for the count's next remark was significant.

"You are acquainted with the Lady Rosalind Val-dai?" he said.

"I am," answered Ruric, now beginning to wonder.

"Well, sir," resumed Damonoff, with much haughtiness, "perhaps my business can be quickly and satisfactorily settled. It is my desire to make the Lady Rosalind my wife."

Ruric Nevel started at these words, and he clasped his hands to hide their tremulousness. But he was not long debating upon an answer.

"And why have you come to me with this information, sir?" he asked.

"You should know that already. Do you not love the lady?"

"Sir Count, you ask me a strange question. What right have you to question me upon such a theme?"

"The right that every man has to pave the way for

his own rights," replied Damonoff, sharply. "But if you choose not to answer, let it pass. I know you do love the lady. And now I ask you to renounce all claims to her hand."

"Sir Count, your tongue runs into strange moods of speech. I renounce all claims to Rosalind Valдай's hand?—Was't so you meant?"

"Aye, sir—precisely so."

"Perhaps you will inform me what claims I may have in that quarter," Ruric replied, with some tremulousness in his tone, for the very subject was one that moved him deeply.

"Ruric Nevel, you shall not say that I did not make myself fully understood, and hence I will explain." The count spoke this as speaks a man who feels that he is doing a very condescending thing, and in the same tone he proceeded: "The Lady Rosalind is of noble parentage and very wealthy. My own station and wealth are equal with hers—my station, at all events. She may possess the undivided right to more property than I do. But that matters not. I love her, and must have her for my wife. I have been to see the noble duke, her guardian, and he objects not to my suit. But he informed me that there was one impediment, and that was her love for you. He knows full well—as I know, and as all must know—that she could never become your wife; but yet he is anxious not to interfere too much against her inclinations. So a simple denial from you, to the effect that you can never claim her hand, is all that is necessary. You understand me, I trust. We seek this only for the fair lady's own good. Of course, you must be aware that the duke would

she is
related

never consent to her union with you ; and yet he would wish to have your denial to show to Rosalind when he announces his decision. I have a paper here all drawn up, and all that will be necessary is simply your signature. Here—it is only a plain, simple avowal on your part that you have no hopes nor thoughts of seeking the hand of the lady in marriage.”

As the count spoke he drew a paper from the bosom of his marten doublet, and having opened it he handed it towards the gunmaker. But Uric took it not. He drew back and gazed the visitor sternly in the face.

“Sir Count,” he cried, in a tone full of noble indignation, “what do you suppose I am? Do you mean to tell me that Olga, Duke of Tula, has commissioned you to obtain such a renunciation of me?”

“Stephen,” spoke the count, turning to his companion, “you heard the instructions the duke gave me this morning?”

“Aye,” returned Urzen, directing his speech to Ruric. “I did hear; and you have stated the case plainly.”

“I may be as much surprised as yourself,” resumed the count, haughtily, “at this strange taste of the duke. Why he should seek this signal from you I can only imagine upon his desire to call up no regrets in the bosom of his fair ward. He knows that she was once intimate with you, and that she now feels a warm friendship for you. For her sake he would have this signal from you.”

“But how for her sake?” asked Ruric.

“Why,” returned Damonoff, “do you not see? Rosalind, in the simplicity of her heart, may think that

you—a—that you might claim her love; and out of pure principle grant it to you simply because you were the first claimant.”

“But I never claimed her love,” said Ruric, warmly. “If she loves me, she loves me from her own heart. With the noble duke I never spoke but once, and then he came here for me to temper his sword. If you would marry with the lady, do so; and if you seek help in the work, seek it from those who have some power in the matter.”

“You mistake, sir,” said the count, hotly. “I seek not power now. I only seek a simple word from one who may have some influence—even as a beggar, having saved the life of a king, may, through royal gratitude, wield an influence. Will you sign the paper?”

Now, all this seemed very strange to Ruric, and he knew that there was something behind the curtain which he was not permitted to know. He knew the proud and stubborn duke well enough to know that he never would have sent such a message as this but for some design more than had yet appeared. In short, he could not understand the matter at all. It looked dark and complex; such conduct was in direct conflict with the nature of the man from whom it now appeared to have emanated. Ruric pondered upon this a few moments, and he made up his mind that he would on no account yield an atom to the strange demand thus made upon him.

“Sir Count,” he said, calmly and firmly, “you have plainly stated your proposition, and I will as plainly answer. I cannot sign the paper.”

"Ha!" gasped Damonoff, in quick passion. "Do you refuse?"

"Most flatly."

For a few moments the count gazed into Ruric's face, as though he doubted the evidence of his own senses.

"It is the duke's command," he said at length.

"The Duke of Tula holds no power of command over me," was the gunmaker's calm reply.

"Beware! Once more I say: Sign this paper!"

"You but waste your breath, Sir Count, in speaking thus. You have my answer."

"By heavens! Ruric Nevel, you shall sign this!" the count cried, madly.

"Never, sir."

"But look you, sirrah! Here is my whole future of life based upon my hopes of union with this fair girl. Her guardian bids me get this paper of you ere I can have her hand. And now, do you think I'll give it up so easily? No! I'll have your name to this, or I'll have your life!"

"Now, your tongue runs away with you, Sir Count. I have given you my answer. Be sure that only one man on earth can prevail upon me to place my name upon that paper."

"And who is he?"

"I mean the emperor."

"But you will sign it!" hissed Damonoff, turning pale with rage. "Here it is—sign! If you would live—sign!"

"Perhaps he cannot write," suggested Urzen, contemptuously.

"Then he may make his mark," rejoined the count, in the same contemptuous tone.

"It might not require much more urging to induce me to make my mark in a manner not at all agreeable to you, sir," the youth retorted, with his teeth now set, and the dark veins upon his brow starting more plainly out. "You have come upon my premises, and you have sought your purpose. You now have your answer, and for your own sake—for my sake—I beg you to leave me."

"Not until your name is upon this paper!" cried Damonoff, shaking the missive furiously and crumpling it in his hand.

"Are you mad, Sir Count? Do you think me a fool?"

"Aye—a consummate one."

"Then," returned Ruric, with a curl of utter contempt upon his finely-chiselled lip, "you need have no further dealings with me. There is my door, sir."

For some moments Conrad Damonoff seemed unable to speak from very anger. He had surely some deep, anxious purpose in obtaining Ruric's name to that paper; and to be thus thwarted by a common artisan was maddening to one who, like him, based all his force of character upon his title.

"Sign!" he hissed.

"Fool!" cried Ruric, unable longer to contain himself in view of such stupid persistence. "Do you seek a quarrel with me?"

"Seek? I seek what I will have. Will you sign?"

"Once more—no!"

"Then you shall know what it is to thwart such as me! How's that?"

As these words passed from the count's lips in a low, hissing whisper, he aimed a blow with his fist at Ruric's head. The gunmaker had not dreamed of such a dastardly act, and he was not prepared for it. Yet he dodged it sufficiently to escape the mark upon his face, receiving the blow lightly upon the side of his head. But he stopped not to consider now. As the count drew back Ruric dealt him a blow upon the brow that felled him to the floor.

"Beware, Stephen Urzen!" he whispered to the count's companion, as that individual made a movement as though he would come forward. "I am not myself now, and you are safest where you are."

The man thus addressed viewed the gunmaker a few moments, and he seemed to conclude that he had better avoid a personal encounter, for his fists relaxed, and he moved to the side of his fallen friend and assisted him to his feet.

Conrad Damonoff gazed into his antagonist's face a few moments in silence. His face was deathly pale, and his whole frame quivered. Upon his forehead there was a livid spot where he had been struck, but the skin was not broken.

"Ruric Nevel," he said, in a hissing, maddened tone, "you will hear from me. The mad spirit of a vengeance such as mine can overlook your plebeian stock."

And with this he turned away.

"Paul," said the gunmaker, turning to his boy after the men had gone, "not a word of this to my mother. Be sure."

CHAPTER III.

LOVE.

That night Ruric Nevel had strange fancies while waking, and strange dreams while sleeping. Long and deeply did he ponder upon the strange business which had called Count Conrad to his shop, and in no way, under no light, could he see any reason for it. Why he, a youth who had never spoken with the proud duke, save once on common business, and who was so far down in the social scale, should have been thus called upon to give a virtual consent to the bestowal of Rosalind Valdai's hand, was beyond his ken. He was but a poor artisan—she, a wealthy heiress and a scion of nobility, and she was under the legal guardianship of the duke, whose word, so far as she was concerned, was law. And again, Conrad Damonoff was a count, and reputed to be wealthy. To be sure, he was somewhat dissolute, but then a majority of his compeers were the same. Now, if this count loved the Lady Rosalind, and had asked for her hand, and the duke was willing he should have it, why had this extraordinary proposal been sent to the poor gunmaker?

Ruric asked this question of himself a hundred times. He would commence and lay down all the premises in his mind, and then he would try and make the deduction; but no reasonable one could he arrive at. One thought clung about him, like a dim spectre

at night, which Hope would make an angel, and which Fear would paint a demon. Could it be possible that Rosalind had told her love for him, and that the duke would pay some deference to it? He tried to think so. Hope whispered that it might be so. But Fear would force itself in, and speak in tones so loud that they could not be misunderstood. Finally the youth resolved upon the only reasonable course. He concluded to let the matter rest, so far as his own surmises were concerned, until he could see Rosalind,—and that he was determined to do as soon as possible.

On the following morning, as he was preparing for breakfast, he saw Olga, the duke, pass by, and strike off into the Borodino road. Now, thought he, is the time for the visit to Rosalind; and as soon as he had eaten his breakfast, he prepared for the visit. He dressed well, and no man in Moscow had a nobler look when the dust of toil was removed from his brow and garb.

“Paul,” he said, entering the shop where the boy was at work, “I may be back at noon. At any rate, such is my intention; and if either of those men calls who were here yesterday, you may tell him so.”

“But,” returned the lad, “if they ask me any questions?”

“Answer them as you think best.”

“And if they should ask me if you would fight?”

“Tell that I hold my life too dear at the expense of an insult.”

“But surely, my master, the count will challenge you.”

“I think he will. And,” added Ruric, as an entirely

new thought came to his mind, "mayhap he came here to create a quarrel to that end. I think he did."

"I am sure of it," said Paul.

A moment later Ruric's frame quivered with suppressed passion, and then he said :

"Let them come, and if they come, or if either of them comes, while I am gone, tell them, or him, that I am their very humble servant in all things reasonable."

Paul promised and then the gunmaker turned away. In the hall he threw on his heavy fur pelisse, and having reached the nearest hostelry, he took a horse and sleigh and started off for the Kremlin, within which the duke resided.

Within one of the sumptuously furnished apartments of the palace of the Duke of Tula sat Rosalind Val dai. She was a beautiful girl ; molded in perfect form, with the full flush of health and vigor, and possessing a face of peculiar sweetness and intelligence. She was only nineteen years of age, and she had been ten years an orphan. Her hair was of a golden hue, and the sunlight loved to dwell amid the clustering curls. Her eyes, which were of a deep liquid blue, sparkled brightly when she was happy ; and when she smiled the lovely dimples of her cheeks held the smile even after it had faded from the lips. There was nothing of the aristocrat in her look—nothing proud, nothing haughty ; but gentleness and love were the true elements of her soul, and she could only be happy when she knew that she was truly loved. She liked respect, but she spurned that respect which only aims at outward show, while the heart may be reeking with vilest selfishness.

19
over

Rosalind sat there in the apartment which was hers

for her own private use, and she was sad and thoughtful. One fair hand supported her pure brow, while with the other she twisted the ends of the silken sash that confined her heavy robe. Thus she sat when the door of her apartment was opened and a young girl entered. This new-comer was a small, fair creature, bright and quick, with that raven hair and those large, dark eyes of dreamy light which bespeak the child of Moslem blood. Her name was Zenobie, and she was now about sixteen years of age. Rosalind's father had picked her up on the battle-field from which the Turks had fled, and being unable to find any claimants, he had brought her home, then almost an infant. And now she was Rosalind's attendant and companion. She loved her kind and gentle mistress, and would have laid down life itself in the service.

"How now, Zenobie?" asked Rosalind, as she noticed the girl hesitate.

"There is a gentleman below who would see you," the girl replied.

"Then tell him I cannot see him," said Rosalind, trembling.

"But this is Ruric Nevel, my mistress."

"Ruric!" exclaimed the fair maiden, starting up, while the rich blood mounted to her brow and temples.

"Oh! I am glad he has come. My prayers are surely answered. Lead him thither, Zenobie."

The girl departed, and ere long afterwards Ruric entered the apartment. He walked quickly to where Rosalind had arisen to her feet, and taking one of her hands in both his own, he pressed it to his lips. He had had a well-formed speech upon his lips when en-

tered the room, but 'twas gone now. He could only gaze into the lovely face before him, and murmur the name that sounded so sweetly on his lips. But the emotions of his soul became calm at length, and then he spoke with more freedom.

"Lady," he said, after he had taken a seat, "you will pardon me for this visit when you know its cause. And you will pardon me, too, if I speak plainly what I have to speak."

"Surely, sir—"

"O—call me Ruric. Let us at least not forget the the friendship of childhood."

"Then I am not a *lady*," said Rosalind, smiling.

"No, Rosalind."

"Ah, Ruric."

"As we were in childhood," whispered the youth.

"In all but years," returned Rosalind, in the same low tone.

"And I may wear the same image in my heart?"

"I cannot cast it from mine if I would."

"The image of childhood, dear Rosalind?"

"Aye—save that it has grown to manhood, dear Ruric."

What more could he ask for love? He had not aimed at this confession so soon. But he put it not from him now. He gazed a moment into the fair maiden's eye, and as he saw the love-lit tear gathering there, and the happy smile working its way about the rosy lips, and away into the joyous dimples, he opened his arms and clasped the fondly loved one to his bosom.

"Oh, I am not deceived in this," he murmured. "Speak, dearest one."

"I cannot forget the love of the happy times ago," the noble girl replied, gazing up through her happy tears. "Oh, how many and many an hour have I prayed to God that those days might return, and that the one true heart of earth I loved might be mine once more. Ruric, why should I hide the truth, or why set it aside? To me thou art all in all. I have no one else to love, and none to love me else, save the noble girl who brought you hither. I can tell you no more."

Happy Ruric! Happy at that moment—forgetting all else but the love that gleamed out upon him then, and clasping the cherished object so ardently to his bosom.

But the moments flew on, and, at length, his mind came to the subject of his visit.

"Rosalind," he said, holding one of her fair hands in his grasp, "you know the Count Conrad Damonoff?"

"Aye," replied the maiden, with a shudder. "He is here very often, and he has forced himself upon my companionship when, if he had sense, he must have known I liked it not."

"He is a suitor for your hand, is he not?"

"He was; but he is not now."

"Not now?" repeated Ruric, with surprise. "What mean you?"

"Why—simply that he has asked the duke for my hand, and that he was answered in the negative."

"Did you hear the duke answer him so?"

"No; but so the duke assured me he had done so. But what mean you?"

"I will tell you. Yesterday the count came to my dwelling, accompanied by Stephen Urzen. He had a

paper drawn up by the duke's own hand, in which I was made to say—or rather, by which the writer said, that he disclaimed all pretensions to your hand, and that he wished not to marry you—that he freely gave you up, meaning to seek within the sphere of his own social circle some companion when he wished. And this I was asked to sign.”

“By the count?”

“Yes,—but by the duke's orders.”

“Oh—it cannot be,” cried Rosalind, trembling.

“And he further assured me that the duke had requested him to obtain my signature thereto, so that he might receive your hand without impediment.”

“So that the *count* might receive my hand?”

“Yes.”

“But the duke assured me only yesterday that I should not be troubled any more with the count. May there not be some mistake?”

“There can be none on my part. The instrument was in the duke's own hand.”

“But you did not sign it?”

“Ask me if I took my own life—if I made a curse for all I loved.”

“It is strange,” the maiden murmured, bowing her head a few moments. “And yet,” she added, looking up into her companion's face, “I do not think the duke would be treacherous?”

“He may be,” answered Ruric. “He knows how lightly our noble emperor holds empty titles, and perhaps he fears that if this matter came to the imperial ear, and you should claim the right to marry with whom you pleased, Peter would grant your prayer.

Hence he wished to get my claim set aside so that he may have a clearer field in which to move. Do you know how the duke's affairs stand at present?"

Rosalind thought awhile ere she answered; and then, while a startled expression came to her face, she said:

"Ruric, I do remember now that between the duke and young Damonoff there is some matter of dispute. There is some question of property."

"Ah!" uttered the youth, earnestly. "How is that?"

"Why, as near as I can understand it, there was a dispute between the duke and the elder Damonoff concerning the ownership of Drotzen, the estate on the Don, in Kaluga; and since the father's death Conrad has maintained his family claim. You know the duke and the old count married sisters, and this estate belonged to them."

"And now," suggested Ruric, "may not the duke mean to compromise this matter by giving your hand to the count and taking Drotzen in exchange?"

"Oh, I cannot think so," the maiden returned, earnestly. "The duke would not do that. He is kind to me, I am sure. He loves me as though I were his own child. I know he does, for in a thousand ways he has shown it. He is mindful of my comfort, and anticipates my every want. No, no—if he is deceiving any one he must be deceiving the count."

Ruric started as the new suspicion flashed upon him. Had the duke sent Damonoff upon that mission on purpose to get him into a quarrel?

"Aye," thought the youth to himself, "the duke knows that I have taught the sword-play, and he knows

that the count would be no match for me. So he thinks in this subtle manner to make me an instrument for ridding him of a plague."

But the youth was careful not to let Rosalind know of this. He thought she would be unhappy if she knew that a duel was likely to come off between himself and the count.

After some minutes of comparative silence, Ruric touched upon a point which lay very near his heart.

"Rosalind," he said, taking both her hands in his own, "there is one point upon which we have never spoken; and I know you would have me speak plainly and candidly. You know my situation. My father and your father fought side by side, but my father fell, while yours returned to his home. For his eminent services your father received a title and a noble estate from the grateful Feodor, while my father was only forgotten. Hence our stations are now widely different. Yet I am not poor. No other man in the empire can compete with me in the manufacture of arms, and from my labor I derive a handsome income. You know all that. And now, if other obstacles were removed, would you give me your hand, and become mine for life?"

"Aye, Ruric," the noble girl answered, with beaming eyes, and a joyful expression of countenance. "Were you reduced to the lowest estate of poverty, so long as your generous, pure soul was free, I should only be the more anxious to lift you up. Oh, my love knows only the heart whereon it is secured, and for my future of joy I ask only the truth of my husband's love."

"Bless you, dearest," Ruric murmured, as he drew

the maiden to his side ; and then he added : “ You will not allow the duke to give your hand away ? ”

“ Never, Ruric.”

“ If he asks you for your hand to bestow upon any of his friends, you will tell him—”

“ That my heart is not mine to give, and that my hand cannot go without it.”

“ O—bless you, Rosalind—bless you. God keep and guard you ever.”

Ruric then took leave of Rosalind, and was soon in the open court. Here he entered his sledge, and then drove to the barracks in the Khitagorod, where he inquired for Alaric Orsa, a lieutenant of the guard. The officer was quickly found, and as he met Ruric his salutation was warm and cordial. He was a young man, not over five-and-twenty, and one of the finest looking soldiers in the guard.

“ Alaric,” said the gunmaker, after the first friendly salutations had passed, “ I may have a meeting with Conrad Count Damonoff. He has sought a quarrel—insulted me most grossly—aimed a blow at my head—and I knocked him down. You can judge as well as I what the result must be.”

“ Most surely he will challenge you,” cried the officer, excitedly.

“ So I think,” resumed Ruric, calmly. “ And now will you serve me in the event ? ”

“ With pleasure.”

“ I may refer his messenger to you ? ”

“ Yes—surely. And how shall I act ? What will you do ? ”

"Knock him down again under the same provocation."

"I understand. You wish to retract nothing?"

"No. Listen: I will tell you all since I seek your aid."

And thereupon Ruric related all that had occurred at the time of the count's visit to his shop.

"Good!" said Alaric, as the gunmaker finished. "He must challenge you, and then you'll punish him. He's too proud now. He can handle some of his lilytops who associate with him; and perhaps he thinks he can do the same when he comes out among the harder men. But never mind—I will be punctual and faithful."

Ruric reached home just as his mother was spreading the board for dinner. He often went away on business, and she thought not of asking him any questions.

*no to find out
no looking
present*

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHALLENGE.

In the afternoon Ruric retired to his shop, where he went to work upon a gun which had been ordered some days before. As yet he had said nothing to Paul concerning the affair of the day previous since his return from the Kremlin. He asked him now, however, if any one had called.

"Only the monk," returned Paul, without seeming to consider that there was anything very important in the visit.

"Do you mean the black monk—Vladimir?"

"Yes, my master. He called here about the middle of the forenoon. He wanted one of the small daggers with the pearl haft."

"And did you let him have one?"

"Certainly. He paid me four ducats for it, and would have paid more had I been willing to take it."

"And did he make any conversation?"

"Yes. He asked me why the Count Damonoff came here yesterday."

"Ha! How did he know of their visit?"

"He was waiting at the inn for a sledge, and he overheard the count and his companion conversing upon the subject."

"And did he ask you any questions touching the particulars?"

"Yes—many."

"And how answered you?"

"I told him the whole story, from beginning to end. I found he knew something of their purpose from what he accidentally overheard, and rather than have him go away full of surmises, I told him all."

"Of the message, too?"

"Yes, my master. I told him all that happened, from the showing of the paper which the duke had drawn up, to the departure of the angry man."

"And what did the monk say?" Ruric asked, very earnestly.

"Why, he said he knew the count, and that he was a proud, reckless fellow, and worth but little to society. That was all. He did not seem to care much about it any way; only he said he should have done just as you did, and that every law of justice would bear you out. He had more curiosity than interest, though I am sure all his sympathies are with you."

"Very well," returned Ruric. "It can matter but little what the monk thinks about it, though I would rather have him know the truth, if he must know anything, for I would not be misunderstood."

"He understands it all now, my master; and I trust you are not offended at the liberty I took in telling him."

"Not at all, Paul—not at all."

Here the conversation dropped, and the work was resumed in silence. It was past three o'clock when Ruric's mother came and informed him that a gentleman, in the house, would speak with him.

"Is it Stephen Urzen?" asked the youth.

His mother said it was.

"Then bid him come out here."

Claudia retired, and in a few moments more the gentleman made his appearance.

"Ruric Nevel," he said, bowing very stiffly and haughtily, "I bring a message from the Count Damonoff."

"Very well, sir," answered the gunmaker, proudly, "I am ready to receive it."

Thereupon Urzen drew a sealed note from his pocket, and handed it to Ruric, who took it and broke the seal. He opened it, and read as follows:

"RURIC NEVEL: An insult of the most aggravating nature has for the time levelled all distinctions of caste between us. Your blood alone can wash out the stain. I would not murder you outright, and in no other way but this can I reach you. My friend, the bearer of this, will make all arrangements. If you dare not meet me, say so, that all may know who is the coward.

"DAMONOFF."

When Ruric had read the missive he crushed it in his hand, and gazed its bearer some moments in the face without speaking.

"Will you answer?" asked Urzen. He spoke more softly than before, for he saw something in the gunmaker's face which he dared not provoke.

"Are you acquainted with Alaric Orsa, a lieutenant of the guard?"

"Yes, sir—I know him well."

"Then let me refer you to him. He will make all necessary arrangements, and I shall hold myself bound by his plans. I trust that is satisfactory?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you and I need have no more to say."

"Only on one point," said Urzen, with some little show of confusion. "You are the challenged party, and you will have the choice of weapons. The count has not mentioned this; mind you, he has not; but I, as his friend, deem it no more than right to speak of it. I trust you will choose a gentleman's weapon. In the use of the pistol or the gun he is not versed."

"While you imagine I am," said Ruric, with a contemptuous curl of the lip; for he knew that the man was lying. He could see by the man's very looks that Damonoff had commissioned him to broach this matter.

"Of course you are," returned Urzen.

"And the count is most excellently versed in the use of the sword, is he not?"

"He is accounted a fair swordsman."

"Aye—so I thought. But it matters not to me. The idea had not entered my mind before, save that I supposed swords would be the only weapons thought of. However, Orsa will settle it with you. I have given him no directions at all, save to serve me as he thinks proper, and to act upon the understanding that if I have given offence to the count I would do the same again under provocation. You understand now?"

"I do, sir," replied Urzen, in a choking tone.

"Then wait a moment, and I will give you a message to Orsa."

Thus speaking, Ruric went to his desk, and upon the bottom of the missive he had received from the Count he wrote:

"DEAR ALARIC : I send this to you by the same hand that bore it to me, and you are hereby empowered to act for me as you may deem proper. I shall be governed strictly by your arrangements.

"RURIC."

Having written this he showed it to Urzen, and asked him if he would bear it to the lieutenant. An affirmative reply was given, and then simply folding the note in the opposite way from the original fold, the gunmaker superscribed it anew to the lieutenant, and handed it to his visitor. Urzen took it, and with a stiff bow, but without speaking, he turned and left the place.

That evening, about eight o'clock, a sledge drove up to Ruric's door, and Alaric Orsa entered the house. He called the youth aside, and informed him that the arrangements had all been made.

"Damonoff is in a hurry," he said, "and we have appointed the meeting at ten o'clock to-morrow forenoon. It will take place at the bend of the river just beyond the Viska Hill."

"And the weapons?" asked Ruric.

"Swords," returned Orsa. "The count will bring his own, and he gives you the privilege of selecting such an one as you choose."

"I thank you, Alaric, for your kindness thus far, and you may rest assured that I shall be prompt."

"Suppose I call here in the morning for you?" suggested the visitor.

"I should be pleased to have you do so."

"I will, then. I shall be along in good season with my sledge, and we will both reach the ground together."

Thus it was arranged, and then Orsa took his leave.

When Ruric returned to his seat by the fireplace he noticed that his mother watched him narrowly, and with more than ordinary interest. He had once made up his mind that he would say nothing to his mother about the affair until it was over; but as the time was set, and the hour drew nigh, his mind wavered. When it was over where might he be! But he was cut short in his reflections by the voice of his parent.

"Ruric," she said, and her voice trembled while she spoke, "you will pardon me for prying into your affairs, but I cannot hide from myself that something of more than usual moment is on the tapis with you. Why are these men calling to and fro? and why are you so thoughtful and moody? You know a mother's feelings—and you will pardon a mother's anxiety."

"Surely, my mother," the youth replied, gazing up for a moment, and then letting his eyes droop again. At length he resumed—"I had made up my mind to tell you all ere you spoke."

There was something deep and significant in Ruric's tone, and his mother quickly caught the spark.

"What is it?" she tremblingly asked, moving her chair nearer to her child's side.

"Listen," the young man said, and thereupon he detailed the circumstances attending the visit of the Count Damonoff to his shop. Then he told of his own visit to Rosalind, and its results; and then of the visit of Stephen Urzen.

"And now, my mother," he added, without waiting for any reply, "you know it all. You see how I am situated. Remember, our nation has reached its pres-

ent point by successful war. The soul of the nation is built upon military honor, and since our noble emperor has opened the way of advancement to the lowest of his subjects who are brave and true, the coward is looked upon with disgust upon all hands. Yet, my mother, I would have you speak."

For some moments Claudia Nevel was silent. But at length she said, while a tear glistened in her eye :

"I have given one loved being up to my country's good. Russia took my husband from me, and I could ill afford now to lose my son. Yet, rather than one stain should rest upon his name, I would see him dead before me. O, Ruric, you know whether dishonor would rest upon you were you to refuse this challenge."

"I will speak plainly, my dear mother," returned the youth, in a tremulous tone, for his parent's kindness had moved him. "In my soul I should feel perfectly justified in refusing this meeting, for no principle of real honor is at stake. But were I to back out now from this, I should never meet another generous look in Moscow. Every one would point the finger of scorn at me, and the word *coward* would ring always in my ears. It may be a false state of things—I feel that it really is so; but how can I help it? It is the curse of all great military epochs. Battle alone makes heroes, and so all must measure their honor by the force of their arms. The count carries even now upon his brow the mark of my blow, and all will say he has a right to demand satisfaction; though I know that he provoked the quarrel on purpose. I cannot refuse him

on the ground of station, for he is above me in that. I must meet him."

"Then," said the mother, in a low, calm tone, but with much effort, "you shall not feel that your mother would thwart your design. If your own good judgment says go—then go. If they bring your body to me in the stern grasp of death, I shall bow with submission, and such resignation as I can, to the cruel blow. If you come back to me alive I shall thank God that you are spared; but alas! the joy will be clouded with the thought of blood upon your hands, and the knowledge that my joy is another's grief."

moral
club

"No, no, my mother," cried Ruric, quickly and earnestly, "I will not have a fellow-being's blood upon my hand, if I can avoid it. Only to save my own life will I take his. He has done all this himself—all—all. The quarrel was his own, and the first blow was his. The challenge is his, and now is not the responsibility his also?"

"It is, my son, so far as he alone is concerned. If you have a responsibility it must be to your own soul. But tell me—has not the emperor made some law touching this practice of dueling?"

law

"Yes, but only the challenger is responsible. The party challenged is held free from blame in the eyes of the law."

"Then I shall interpose no more objections," said the mother. She tried to speak hopefully, but she could not hide the fearful sadness of her heart. "Could fervent prayer avert the blow it should not fall; but I can only pray as one without power."

A long time after this was passed in silence. Both

the mother and son seemed to have something upon their minds which they wished to say, but dared not. But the former at length overcame her reluctance.

"Ruric, my son," said she, keeping back the tears that struggled for utterance in their silent speech, "is there any little word you would leave?—any matter of moment—"

"No, no," Ruric answered, speaking calmly by effort. "I am yours, and all is yours. But I shall not fall."

"Ah, be not too confident, my son. Let no such assurance lead you to forget your God. I have heard of this count. It was he who slew Rutger; and Momjako, too, he slew in the duel. He is an expert swordsman, and surely means to kill you if he can."

"I am aware of that, my mother. But do you not know that we are all prone to overlook our own powers when wondering upon the feats of others! I may be pardoned for assuring you that the only man who has yet overcome the count at the sword-play was one of my own scholars. While in Spain I practiced with some of the best swordsmen in the kingdom. But listen: I will send one word. For yourself I can tell you nothing which you do not know; but yet you may see Rosalind. If you do, tell her— But you know my soul. You can tell her as you please. But I shall not fall."

It was now late, and ere long Ruric kissed his mother, and then retired to his bed.

And the widow was left alone. With her eyes she followed the retreating form of her beloved son, and when he was gone from her sight she bowed her head and sobbed aloud. When she reached her humble couch she knelt by the side thereof, and poured forth

her pent-up soul to God. When her head had pressed the pillow she tried to hope—she tried to fasten one hope in her mind ; but she looked only into the night. Not one ray of light reached her struggling soul. She opened her eyes of promise in vain—for she looked into a gloom so utter that out of its depths loomed only the blackness of despair.

Sleep on, Ruric. But oh, couldst thou know how thy fond mother's heart is racked there'd be no sleep for thee !

CHAPTER V.

THE DUEL.

On the following morning Ruric was up betimes, and at the breakfast table not a word of the one all-absorbing theme was uttered. After the meal was finished the gunmaker went out to his shop, and took down from one of the closets a long leathern case, in which were two swords, both of the same make and finish, only different in size. They were Toledo blades, and of most exquisite workmanship and finish. Ruric took out the heavier one, which was a two-edged weapon, with a cross-hilt of heavily gilded metal. He placed the point upon the floor, and then with all his weight he bent the blade till the pommel touched the point. The lithe steel sprang back to its place with a sharp clang, and the texture was not started. Then he struck the flat of the blade upon the anvil with great force. The ring was sharp and clear, and the weapon remained unharmed.

"Paul, Moscow does not contain another blade like that! Damascus never saw a better."

Thus spoke the gunmaker to his boy, as he balanced the beautiful weapon in his hand.

"I think you are right, my master," the boy returned, who had beheld the trial of the blade with unbounded admiration. "But," he added, "could you not temper a blade like that?"

"Perhaps, if I had the steel. But I have it not. The steel of these two blades came from India, and was originally in one weapon—a ponderous, two-handed affair belonging to a Bengal chieftain. The metal possesses all the hardness of the finest razor, with the elasticity of the most subtle spring. My old master at Toledo gave me these as a memento. Were I to mention the sum of money he was once offered for this largest one you would hardly credit it."

"How much?" asked Paul, with a boy's curiosity.

"It was a sum equal to about seven hundred ducats."

"And yet he gave it away?"

"Aye—for its price was but imaginary, while its worth to him was only commensurate with the good it did him. If he told the truth he loved me, and these he gave me as a parting gift, as the best patterns I could wish for when making such."

After this Ruric put up the smaller sword, and then gave Paul a few directions about the work, promising to be back before night. The faithful boy shook his head dubiously as he heard this promise, but he said nothing, and shortly afterwards Ruric went into the house. Just then Alaric Orsa drove up to the door.

Ruric was all ready but putting on his bonnet and pelisse. His mother was in the kitchen. He went to her with a smile upon his face. He put his arms about her and drew her to his bosom.

"God bless you, my mother. I shall come back." He said this, and then he kissed her.

"God keep—and—"

It was all she could say.

Ruric gazed a moment into her pale face—then he kissed her again—and again he said :

“God bless you, my mother. I shall come back.”

He dared stop to speak no more. Gently seating his fond mother upon a chair, he turned and hurried from the place. In the hall he threw on his pelisse and bonnet, and then he opened the door and passed out.

“Have you a good weapon?” asked Orsa, as the horse started on.

“I have a fair one. I *think* it will not deceive me.”

“I asked,” resumed Orsa, “because Damonoff prides himself upon the weapon he wears. It is a German blade, and he thinks he can cut in twain the blade of any other weapon in Moscow with it.”

“I have a good weapon,” Ruric said, quietly; “and one which has stood more tests than most swords will bear.” And after some further remarks he related the peculiar circumstances attending the making of the sword, and his possession of it.

At length they struck upon the river, and in half an hour more they reached the appointed spot. The day was beautiful. The sun shone brightly upon the glistening snow, and the air was still and calm. The sharp frost of the atmosphere served only to brace the system up, and Ruric threw open his pelisse, that he might breathe more freely. He had been upon ground but a few minutes when the other party came in sight around the bend of the river.

As soon as the count and his second had arrived, and the horses had been secured, the lieutenant proposed that they should repair to the building, which was close at hand. This was a large open boat-house, which was

unused and deserted in the winter, and it was proposed to go in there because the reflection of the strong sunlight from the bright snow was calculated to blind and blur the eye.

"Ha! what means that?" exclaimed Orsa, as he saw a sledge just turning the bend of the river with an officer in it.

"It is only a surgeon," replied Damonoff. "I would not cut a man's flesh without giving him a fair chance to survive it."

"And then you may find him serviceable to yourself, eh?" suggested the lieutenant.

"Of course. There is no telling what may happen."

In a moment more the new sledge came up, and Ruric recognized its inmate as an army surgeon whom he had seen before, though he knew not his name.

"Now for the old boat-house," cried Urzen.

"Aye," added Damonoff. "Let us have this business done, for I would be back to dinner. I dine with Olga to-day, and a fair maiden awaits my coming."

"Notice him not," whispered Orsa, who walked close by Ruric's side. "That is one of his chief points when engaged in an affair of this kind. He hopes to get you angry, and so unhinge your nerves."

"Never fear," answered the gunmaker. "Be sure he only brings new danger to himself, for such efforts will find their point in the muscle of my arm."

The party halted when they reached the interior of the rough structure, and the count threw off his pelisse and drew his sword. Ruric followed his example.

"Sir Count," the latter said as he moved a step forward, "ere we commence this work I wish all present

to understand distinctly how I stand. You have sought this quarrel from the first. Without the least provocation from me you have insulted me most grossly, and this is the climax. So, before God and man, be the result upon your own head."

"Out, lying knave—"

"Hold," cried the surgeon, laying his hand heavily upon the count's arm. "You have no right to speak thus, for you lower yourself when you do it. If you have come to fight, do so honorably."

An angry reply was upon Damonoff's lips, but he did not speak. He turned to his antagonist and said :

"Will you measure weapons, sir? Mine may be a mite the longest. I seek no advantage; and I have one here of the same length and weight as my own, if you wish it."

"I am well satisfied as it is," replied Ruric.

"Then take your ground. Are you ready?"

"I am!"

The two swords were crossed in an instant, with a clear, sharp clang.

There was some contrast between the two combatants, but not much, apparently. The count was a little the taller, and Ruric was some the heavier. But to a close observer there was a peculiar contrast in the bearing of the two men. That breast, swelling out so nobly, and those massive shoulders, made for the seat of physical power, were Ruric's alone to possess. Yet Conrad Damonoff was accounted a strong man. In the athletic sports of the club-court he had few superiors, and not many equals. But Ruric Nevel had never shown his strength there.

Now, for the first time, that contemptuous look passed from the count's face. As his eye caught his antagonist's position—as he noticed the calm, dignified, quiet ease of every limb; and as he caught the deep, mystic fire of those expressive eyes, he knew that he had no common amateur to deal with.

At length Conrad Damonoff started back, and a quick cry escaped his lips. His antagonist's point had touched his bosom—it had pressed against his heart and had not been driven home. Well he knew that his life was his no longer, for the gunmaker had gained it, and—spared it.

"You fence well," he gasped, struggling to regain his composure.

"*You* are not a novice," returned Ruric, calmly, at the same time allowing his point to drop.

"Come on," the count cried, now gathering all his energies for another effort.

And again the weapons were crossed. This time Damonoff was more guarded. Before he had been impelled by his own assurance; but now he was forced to regard his opponent's power. Ruric quickly found that his foe was more careful than at first, and he carried his own point accordingly. At the twelfth stroke the count made a feint to the left—then at the throat, and then, with a quick, lightning-like motion, he thrust straight at his antagonist's heart. But his meaning had been read from the first by Ruric. The youth caught the motion of the eye, and he saw that his heart was the place looked to. His own movement was almost instinctive. He received his antagonist's sword midway upon his own blade—then moved his arm quickly forward and

caught his enemy's point under his cross-guard;—then, with all his power, he wrenched his arm upward and backward, and the count's sword went flying across the building. It struck the opposite wall with a dull clang, and on the next instant it was half buried in the snow.

"Fear not, sir," said Ruric, as the count started back with both hands raised. "I never strike an unarmed man."

Damonoff's arms fell to his side, and a deep blush of shame mantled his face.

"By St. Paul!" cried the surgeon, "your life is forfeit, Sir Count; and now you should be satisfied."

"No, no," the discomfited man exclaimed, starting up with rage and mortification. "That was but a slip. 'Twas a false step—a cowardly feint. I am not yet overcome."

"But man of mortality, even now your life is Nevel's. He may run you through now if he chooses."

"But he has not," the count cried, springing to where his sword had fallen and snatching it up..

"Sir Count," here spoke Ruric, calmly, but with marked contempt, "you should not blame me for what I have done, for thrice have you tried to break my sword."

"Then try it again!" Damonoff exclaimed. "Take my sword again if you can."

"Perhaps not," our hero retorted. "But be sure your sword shall be used no more after this day."

"Ha! Brag not, but strike. If you can—"

The conclusion of the sentence was drowned by the flash of steel.

At the second stroke the count made another furious thrust at his antagonist's heart. Ruric sprang quickly aside, and with the whole power of his good right arm he struck Damonoff's blade close to the haft and broke it in twain.

"My other sword! my other sword!" the count shouted, now blinded by absolute madness. "Oh, give me my other—"

"Hold!" cried both the surgeon and Stephen Urzen in concert. "You are mad, Conrad."

"Mad!—Oh, I shall be mad! Where is my sword!" the reckless man yelled, casting the bladeless pommel down.

"But will you not listen one—"

"Away, I say! Shall I give up because my sword is broken? By the gods, the weapon deceived me. Where is the other?"

"Deceived thee, Conrad?" repeated the surgeon, sarcastically. "Had thy head but received a hundredth part of that blow, 'twould not be upon thy shoulders now."

But the count was beyond all reason. In his madness he saw not that his sword had been broken on purpose. He did not see that he had been at his antagonist's mercy. But his friends saw it all.

"Ha! whom have we here?" cried Alaric, whose eye had caught a dark form at the entrance of the old building.

It was Vladimir the monk.

"How now? What seek you here?" asked Urzen, as the fat, burly monk waddled towards the party.

"I heard the clash of arms, my son, as I rode by,

and I stopped to see what it was. Surely, where the work of death is going on, a child of the church may come?"

"Aye," cried the count, "come in welcome, but meddle not. Now!—my sword!—where is it?"

Reluctantly Urzen brought forward the second sword, but ere he gave it up he said:

"Beware, Conrad. You had better—"

"Peace, babbler!" the excited fool hissed, snatching the weapon, and then turning quickly upon the gunmaker.

Thus far Ruric had remained silent, but he felt it his duty to speak now.

"Sir Count," he said, in a tone so stern and authoritative, and with a look so commanding, that Damonoff was held in abeyance by it, "I must speak one word. You have provoked a quarrel with me—and you have challenged me. I have no fear of death when duty calls for my life, but I would not die thus, nor would I slay a fellow-being thus. Six separate times to-day since our swords first crossed, have I spared your life."

"Liar!"

"And twice have I had you before me unarmed," Ruric continued, without noticing the interruption. "I had hoped this would have shown you that I sought not harm to you; and, furthermore, that you were no match for me at this kind of work."

"Out, fool! yelled Damonoff, now fairly frothing with rage. "If you dare not cross swords again, say so, but do not crawl off like a coward!"

"One word more," said Ruric, paling for an instant beneath the unmerciful insult of the senseless tongue

that assailed him, and he stood proudly erect while he spoke, "before these men here assembled, and before my God, I swear, that thus far I have spared you; but my own life may be the forfeit if I trifle with you more. So now—beware! You have sufficient warning!"

Perhaps the count really overlooked the facts of which Ruric had spoken. In his ungovernable rage he may have fancied 'twas only accident that had worked against him. However, he started forward once more, and made a furious lunge at his antagonist.

"Now," he gasped, "play your best, for my sword's my own!"

But Ruric spoke not. He saw that the count was stronger than before—for his rage seemed to give him a maniac's power—and that he was earnest only for life or death. He struck quickly and furiously, and his movements were strange and unprecedented. He threw up all rules of exercise, and cut and thrust only in wild madness. Twice Ruric came nigh being run through. He lost all run of his opponent's play, and quickly saw that he must put a stop to the conflict or run the risk of leaving a childless mother in his home to see that day's sun sink.

"Will you give o'er?" he asked, as he struck the count's point down.

"Never! Submit to such as you? Bah!"

A few moments more the conflict lasted. One more opportunity he had at Damonoff's heart—and he spared him. All present saw it save the mad man.

"Fool!" muttered the monk, who trembled from head to foot with excitement, his huge body shaking

like a bag of jelly, "will you throw away your own life, Ruric Nevel? Shall I tell your mother you left her of your own will?"

This mention of his mother drove the last lingering doubt from Ruric's mind. Again he struck the opposing point down, and then he pressed his own point upon the count's bosom. He avoided the heart—he tried to avoid the vitals—but he threw his arm forward, and his glittering blade passed through the fool's body. With an expression of pain upon his features he started back, and rested his reeking point upon the trodden snow. The count came furiously on again, but he struck wildly and at random, Ruric merely warding off his blows, until finally his arm sank. On the next moment his sword dropped from his nerveless grasp, and he fell fainting back into the arms of his attendants.

CHAPTER VI.

BEFORE THE EMPEROR.

"Is he dead?" asked Ruric, starting quickly forward.

"Hold, my son," said the monk, laying his hand upon the young man's arm. "Surely you have nothing to fear. It was none of your work—no more than if you had run your sword to the heart of a wild beast that had attacked you."

"But I did not touch his heart," quickly returned the youth. "I was careful of that. I would have struck him upon the head with the flat of my sword, but I feared I might break his skull."

"He is not dead yet," answered the surgeon, as Ruric pressed forward and asked the question a second time. "He has only fainted from the shock of the blow, coupled with his own fears and passions."

"But will he die?" Ruric asked, kneeling down by the fallen man's side.

"I cannot yet tell," the doctor said, at the same time wiping the blood away, which was flowing freely.

"But why not probe the wound now?" suggested the monk. "Now is the best time, for the place is not yet inflamed; and while he is thus insensible he will be free from pain."

The surgeon at once saw the truth and propriety of this, and he proceeded to act upon the suggestion.

Having selected a probe which appeared applicable, he examined the wound. Ruric watched him eagerly, and with a painful expression.

"I do not think this wound is mortal," the surgeon reported, as he carefully felt his way along the course the steel had taken. "It has passed below the right lung, and only severed some of the smaller blood-vessels. I think, with proper care, he may recover."

"Thank God!" fervently ejaculated Ruric, with his hands clasped.

"But why so anxious?" asked Urzen. "You were ready enough to accept his challenge."

"Aye, else you would have called me a coward," answered the gunmaker, with a flashing eye. "Had I refused to meet him, that fatal word would have met me at every turn. I knew that such a man as he was no match for me at any game where strength of arm and sleight of hand were required. So I meant to disarm him, and then give him up his life, believing that such an act would end the combat. You know how I labored to spare him. But I could not. Yet I would not have the life of a fellow-being—a countryman—upon my hands in such a quarrel. My father died fighting for his country, and so would I die if my death must come from the hand of man; but to die thus would be a curse upon my name—and to inflict such death upon another would be a curse in my memory."

"I believe you, my son," the monk said. "Only if the count dies you should not allow such feelings as you mention to overcome you. In no way are you to blame for this."

"True, father—you speak truly," added the surgeon.

"The young man has acted most nobly, and no blame can be attached to him."

Ruric seemed somewhat relieved by these assurances, and having seen the count's wound dressed, and assisted in bearing the insensible form to the sledge, he took Alaric's proffered arm and proceeded to his own team.

"Who is that monk?" asked the lieutenant as they entered their sledge.

"I only know that he is called Vladimir," replied Ruric. "I have only seen him once before. Have you ever seen him ere this?"

"Yes, several times about our barracks. He has been there when some of our poor fellows have been sick and dying. He seems to be a good-hearted man, and, I should judge, quite intelligent."

"I agree with you there," our hero said. "I think he is a good man; but there is nevertheless a mystery about him which I cannot solve. His countenance is familiar to me, and yet I cannot tell where nor when I have seen him."

"Aye," added Alaric, quickly and eagerly; "that is precisely the case with me. I am very sure that I have seen that man under different circumstances. And others of our company have thought the same."

The two men watched the movements of the monk while they thus spoke, and they noticed that he entered his sledge and drove off towards Borodino.

"Ruric," said the lieutenant, after he had ridden some little distance, and at the same time gazing wonderingly into his companion's face, "you handle the sword like a magician. I'd give all I own at this pres-

ent moment—my commission and all—if I could handle the sword as you can.”

“I do understand the weapon passing well,” the youth modestly answered; “but I have worked hard to gain the science.”

“Ah, ’tis not *all* science,” the officer added. “That wondrous strength of yours is a host in itself.”

“And yet,” said Ruric, “I have seen weaker men than myself who would overcome me easily—or, at least, might overcome me.”

“But they are not in this city,” suggested Orsa, with a peculiar shake of the head.

“True, Alaric. I am not in the habit of mentioning my own powers, but yet I may say that there is no man in Moscow who is my superior in the use of any sort of offensive arms.”

The lieutenant readily admitted the truth of this, and then the conversation turned upon the subject of the count, and the course he had pursued with respect to the event which had just transpired. This conversation lasted until they had reached the door of Ruric’s residence, and having thanked his friend for his kindness, and expressed the hope that at some time he might have opportunity to return some adequate favor, the gunmaker entered the house.

The widow sat in her great chair by the fire, and she was pale and anxious. Her brow was supported by her hands, and at every sound from without she would start up with a frightened expression and listen. At length the sound of bells struck upon her ear—they came nearer and nearer—and they stopped at her door. She would have arisen, but she could not. With her

hands clasped, she bent eagerly forward, and listened with a frantic interest. Soon the door opened. Surely no one but *him* would enter without knocking! She started to her feet—the inner door opened—a male form stood before her.

“Mother!”

“Ruric!—my boy!—safe!”

She tottered forward and sank upon the bosom of her noble son, and while she wound her arms tightly about him she murmured her thanks to God.

By and by the widow became more calm, but still there was an earnest, eager look of fear upon her face. Ruric saw it, and he knew well what it meant.

“Mother,” he said, “the count is not dead.”

“Nor wounded?” she exclaimed, quickly and eagerly.

“Yes—badly. But listen: I could not help it.” And thereupon he related all the circumstances connected with the conflict. When he had concluded his mother pondered a few moments, and then she said:

“Surely, my son, I will try and suffer nothing from this, even should the wicked man die. In all you acted but upon the defensive. From the first he has only been intent on attacking you; and on the battle-ground he would have killed you if he could.”

“Most surely he would, mother. Aye—he would not have hesitated to stab me in the back could he have gained the opportunity. He was mad beyond all self-control, and his eagerness to kill me was only equalled by his chagrin at being overcome by one whom he had hoped easily to conquer.”

After this Ruric went to his shop, but Paul manifested no great emotion upon beholding him.

"You seem to take it as a matter of course that I should return alive and well," said the gunmaker, with a smile.

"Why—of course," returned the boy, composedly. "What would a score of such men as he be to you? Conrad Damonoff hold a sword before Ruric Nevel?—No, I only smiled when I heard his challenge. I should have as soon thought of being anxious about your return from a marten hunt."

Ruric smiled at his boy's peculiar eagerness of expression, but he felt a degree of pride in his words, nevertheless.

It was towards the latter part of the afternoon that Ruric was somewhat startled by seeing some of the Imperial guard approaching his house; and ere long afterwards his mother came to him pale and trembling, and informed him that he was wanted by the emperor's officers.

"Oh!" she groaned, with clasped hands and tearful eyes, "they will take you from me now."

"Fear not, my mother," the youth confidently replied. "The emperor will not blame me when he knows all the particulars. But come—let us go in."

Ruric found the officers—three of them—in the kitchen, and he asked them if they sought him.

"We seek Ruric Nevel, the gunmaker," returned the leader.

"I am the man, sir. May I know what is wanted?"

"Cannot you guess?"

"Why—yes, I suppose it must be on account of the duel which was fought this morning."

"Exactly."

"And who wants me?"

"Who should want you but the emperor?"

"Oh! they would not take my noble boy from me!" cried Claudia, catching the officer by the arm. "Tell our good emperor that Russia has taken my husband from me—that he fell in his country's cause. Tell him my boy was not to blame——"

"Hush, mother," interposed Ruric. "Fear not yet."

"Come," said the leader, "it is growing late, and Peter will not brook delay."

"But they will not harm him!" the mother frantically cried, clinging now to her son.

"No, no, my mother. Rest you easy here until I return." And then turning to the guard he added, "Lead on, and I will follow."

"Now rest you easy, my dear mother;" and with these words Ruric gently set her back into her chair, and then hastened out after the officers. In the entry he put on his bonnet and pelisse, and then followed his conductors out to the street, where stood a double sledge, with two horses attached.

"You seem to look upon the killing of a Russian nobleman as a very small affair," said one of the officers, after they had started on their way.

"Is he dead, then?" Ruric quickly asked.

"The doctors think his case is a critical one. But that is not the thing: You would have killed him if you could."

"No, no. It is not so. All who were present will swear that I tried to spare him."

"Very well," returned the officer, "we shall see about that when we come to the palace. Perhaps you may go clear; but I would not willingly occupy your place."

Ruric cared not to argue the point with those who knew nothing about the circumstances, so he remained silent during the rest of the ride. It was near sundown when they reached the imperial palace, and Ruric was conducted at once into the emperor's presence.

The Emperor Peter was in one of the smaller audience chambers, sitting at a large table covered with purple velvet heavily wrought with gold, and upon either hand stood some of his private attendants. He was a young man, not yet so old as Ruric by some three years, but his face already wore a mature look. His frame was solid, but not large—being rather slight than otherwise in physical bulk. His dress betrayed negligence and carelessness, and was in marked contrast with the rich garbs of his attendants. Such was Peter, of Russia—yet a youth—small in frame, and careless of those graces which go to make up the sum of court life; but still able to bear the affairs of a great nation upon his shoulders. Within that head worked a mighty brain, and in that bosom beat a heart thirsting more for the good of Russia than for self or kindred.

Ruric saw Stephen Urzen and the surgeon there; and he also saw the Duke of Tula there. He met the duke's

eye, and a peculiar sensation of fear ran through his mind as he saw the stern, threatening expression that rested upon Olga's face.

"Sire," spoke the leader of those who had conducted the prisoner thither, "Ruric Nevel stands before you."

"Ah," said Peter, casting his eagle eye over the forms before him. "Nevel—advance."

With a bold yet modest step, Ruric advanced to the table, and with a low bow he awaited the emperor's pleasure. There was a shudder perceptible in the frames of those who wished the prisoner well, for well they knew their mighty ruler's iron will and sternness of legal purpose.

CHAPTER VII.

A STARTLING TRIAL.

In order to understand the circumstances under which Ruric was brought before the emperor it will be necessary to go back a few hours. The autocrat had occasion to send for the surgeon, Kopani, who attended at the duel, and as he was some time in answering the summons, he was questioned, when he did come, concerning his tardiness. His answer was, that he had been attending the Count Damonoff.

"And what ails the count?" asked the emperor. "He was well yesterday."

"Yes—but he has met with an accident to-day."

"Look you, Kopani," the young ruler cried, who saw in an instant that something unusual had happened, "think not to conceal anything from me. What is it, now?"

"Sire, I meant not to hide anything from you. The count hath been engaged in a duel."

"Ha!—was he challenged?"

"No, sire—he was the challenger."

"So, so. And who was the other party?"

"An humble gunmaker, sire, named Ruric Nevel."

"Nevel—Nevel," soliloquized Peter. "The name is familiar."

"His father was a captain in the last war with the Turks. He rose from the ranks under Feodor, and was one of the bravest of the brave."

"Captain Nevel. Ah, yes. I remember now. He and Valdai were the first two that mounted the ramparts at Izium. So the old dispatches read."

"Yes, sire. Poor Nevel was shot a month afterwards while leading his brave company against a whole squadron of Turkish infantry; while Valdai came home and got a colonel's commission."

"And afterwards received a title," added Peter.

"Yes, sire."

"And this gunmaker is that captain's son?"

"Yes, sire."

"And methinks Valdai left a child."

"He did, sire—a daughter, who is now with Olga—she is his ward."

"Yes, yes. And the count fought a duel with young Nevel, and got beaten, eh?"

Before the surgeon could answer, a page entered the chamber and announced that the Duke of Tula wished to see his imperial master.

The emperor directed that he should be admitted; and ere long afterwards the proud duke entered the apartment. He was a tall, stout man, with light hair and blue eyes, and not far from five-and-forty years of age. His bearing was haughty, though he was forced to a show of respect now that he was before his master.

"Sire," spoke the duke, after the usual salutations had passed, "I have come to demand justice at thy hands. My young friend, the Count Conrad Damonoff, has been most brutally murdered."

"Ha! Say you so, Olga?"

“Yes, sire.”

“But how was it?”

“Thus it was, sire: On the day before yesterday I sent the count with a message to one Ruric Nevel, who is a gunmaker in the Sloboda. He went, as I wished, and, while there, the gunmaker, who is a huge fellow, provoked a quarrel, and knocked the nobleman down. Of course the count was offended, and as the ruffian threatened to repeat the offence, and as he furthermore grossly insulted a noble lady whom the count held most dear, he could hardly help challenging him. The fellow accepted the challenge, and has succeeded by the most cowardly manœuvring, in inflicting upon him a mortal wound.”

“This is a serious affair,” said the emperor, who had not failed to notice the astonished look of the surgeon while the duke was telling his story.

“It is most serious, sire; and surely the ruffian should be at once executed.”

“But did you not say that the count challenged him?”

“I did, sire; but you must remember that it was an instinct of self-preservation with the noble count. The fellow would have undoubtedly murdered him had he not taken this course.”

“Were you present at the duel, my lord?”

“No, sire; but I have a friend without who was present.”

“Then you may bring him in.”

The duke departed, and when he returned Stephen Urzen bore him company.

"This is the man, sire," Olga said, as he led his companion forward.

The emperor gazed upon Urzen a few moments in silence, and then he said :

"You were present at this duel, were you not, sir?"

"I was, sire," the man answered, bowing low.

"And he was at their first meeting also, sire," interposed the duke.

"Ah—yes. Then you know all about the affair?"

"Yes, sire," answered Urzen.

"Then tell me about it."

"First, sire," commenced the man, casting a sort of assuring glance at the duke, "the count went to the gunmaker's shop to get him to—to—"

"Let me explain here, sire," interrupted the duke, as his puppet hesitated. "This man may not know properly about that mission. Living with me is a young girl—a ward of mine—a gentle, timid being, who has been somewhat a comfort to me in my loneliness. In childhood she was acquainted with this Ruric Nevel, and now the fellow has presumed thereupon several times to insult her of late with his disgusting familiarity. She dared not remonstrate with him for fear of violence, so she referred the matter to me. The count has been anxious to win her for a wife, so I thought him not an improper person to send on the delicate mission. Accordingly I wrote a sort of promise—in the form of a voluntary assurance—pledging the signer not to make himself familiar with the lady any more. And at the same time he received the assurance that his presence was very disagreeable to the person mentioned. This, I supposed, he would sign at once; and as the count

aspired to her hand I deemed it no more than right that he should render her this service. Now, sire, this gentleman may continue."

Thus bidden Urzen resumed :

"The noble count was desirous, sire, that I should accompany him, and I did so. Upon reaching the man's shop we found him at work upon a gun-lock, I think. He received the note, but refused to sign it. The count urged him to sign, in mild, persuasive language, until the fellow became insolent. Then he used some stronger terms, and I think he made some threat of what he would do if his insults to the lady were repeated ; and thereupon the gunmaker struck him a furious blow in the face and knocked him down. I cannot remember all the threatening language which the fellow used, but it was fearful."

"And how about the duel?" asked the emperor.

In answer to this Urzen related what he had prepared on the subject ; and it need only be said that the report was about on a par with what we have already heard. He even went so far as to swear that the count had tried repeatedly to compromise matters after the conflict had begun—that he begged of Nevel to give up the battle ; but that the latter, thirsting for the young nobleman's blood, kept hotly, madly at it !

It was at this juncture, and without reference to the surgeon, that the emperor sent for Ruric ; and having learned that a lieutenant of the Khitagorod guard was present at the duel, he sent for him also. Orsa arrived first, and was present when Ruric came.

And now Ruric Nevel stood before his emperor.

Peter gazed upon him for some moments, and then he said :

“Sir, thy bearing is bold.”

“Why should it not be, sire, when I stand before one whom I honor and respect and do not fear?” So spoke Ruric, calmly, and with peculiar dignity.

“Not fear?” repeated the autocrat, sternly.

“No, sire. Peter of Russia is not a man to be feared by those who love and honor him.”

“Insolence!” uttered the duke.

The emperor looked up into his face, and he added :

“Now, sire, you can see for yourself some of his traits of character.”

“Aye,” returned Peter, “I see. They are wonderful. I knew not that among my artisans there were men of such boldness.”

The duke knew not how to interpret this, and he moved back a pace.

“Now, sir,” resumed Peter, turning to the gunmaker, “how dared you strike a Russian nobleman?”

“I did not, sire. Conrad Damonoff came to my shop, and he brought me a paper, in which I was required, or ordered, to relinquish all claims to the hand of—”

“Sire,” interposed the duke, “he misstates—”

“Never mind,” broke in the emperor, with an authoritative wave of the hand, “we will hear nothing about the lady here. Why did you strike the count?”

“Because, sire, he descended from his station and struck me. He threw away that peculiar shield which should protect the nobleman, and struck me without provocation.”

“And then you knocked him down?”

"I did, sire."

"And perhaps you would have done the same to me?"

"Sire," answered the youth, quickly, "when Damon-off tried by threats to make me sign his paper, I told him that there was but one man on earth at whose order I would do that thing. The man who has the *right* to command shall never have occasion to strike me."

There was something in this reply, and more in the tone and bearing of him who spoke it, that made the duke tremble. He saw plainly that the emperor's eyes sparkled with admiration as they rested upon the gunmaker.

"But now about this duel," resumed the emperor. "How dared you take advantage of the count in the conflict?"

"Advantage, sire?" repeated the youth, in surprise.

"Aye. Did he not, Stephen Urzen?"

"He did, sire," replied the man thus addressed.

"And which of the two do you call the best swordsman?" Peter asked.

"Why, sire, the count is, or was, vastly his superior.

"And what say you, Sir Lieutenant?"

Alaric trembled, for this was addressed to him. He knew that the duke was anxious to crush his friend, and he feared to draw the wrath of that powerful nobleman down upon his head. But a happy thought came to his aid.

"Sire," he said "I would rather you would judge of that for yourself."

"I judge? And how am I to do that?"

"Let Ruric Nevel's skill be tried here before you. If I mistake not, you have some good swordsmen near your palace. There is Demetrius, the Greek."

"What—my Master-at-Arms?"

"Yes, sire."

"Why—he is the best swordsman in my empire. I think our young adventurer would fare badly in his hands."

"Sire," spoke Ruric, modestly, but yet frankly, "it were sure no disgrace to be overcome by your tutor."

"And will you take a turn with him at the swords?"

"Yes, sire—if so it please you."

"Then," cried the emperor, leaping up, "we'll have some diversion out of this trial. What ho, there! Light up the chamber. Let every lamp be lighted, for we want sight now. Send Demetrius here—and tell him to bring his round-edged swords!"

Both the duke and Urzen stood aghast at this new turn; but they had one hope: Demetrius might overcome the gunmaker so easily that Peter should not see his real power.

Demetrius soon came, and under his arm he carried the swords. They were of the common size, but with round edges and points on purpose for play. The master-at-arms was a powerfully built man, and possessed a splendid form. He was a Greek by birth, and was now retained by the emperor as a teacher of the sword exercise.

"Demetrius," said Peter, "I have sent for you to entertain us with a show of your skill. Here is a man about whose power there is some dispute. Mind you—it is all in kindness. Ruric Nevel, take your weapon."

The youth stepped forward and extended his left hand for the sword, and the right hand he extended for the other to grasp. It was taken warmly, for the Greek saw in an instant that he had a noble man to deal with. And those two men were not much unlike in form. Demetrius was an atom the taller, but Ruric showed the most muscle.

The night had come on, but the great lamps were all lighted, and the room was as bright as day.

"Sir," said Ruric, addressing the Greek, "this is none of my seeking, though I will confess that for a long while I have longed to cross a playful sword with you. I play well."

"I like you," the Greek replied, bluntly and kindly; "and if you beat me I will not like you less. I can afford to be beaten once, seeing that thus far I have never been since first I offered to fence."

"Comè, come," cried Peter, who was impatient for the entertainment, "let's see the opening. Now, stand aside, gentlemen."

Like two twins stood those swordsmen as their weapons crossed with a clear, sharp clang. The Greek led off carefully, and Ruric as carefully warded every stroke. Then the former assumed a guard, and Ruric led off in turn. Ere long the swords clashed with sharper ring, and soon sparks of fire new out from the clanging steel. Louder and louder grew the clang, and quicker and quicker grew the strokes. The thrusts were made with skill and force, but as yet neither had been touched.

The emperor was in ecstasy. He clapped his hands and shouted *bravo* with all his might.

By and by Ruric's eye grew more intense in its meaning fire. His opponent saw it, but he could not tell what it meant. The youth was about to risk the most daring feat of all he knew. Steadily burned his eye, and his lips were set like steel. At length he saw that the Greek was playing for a thrust, and he lowered his point. Demetrius saw the chance, and drawing his arm quickly back he made the thrust with all his power. He was sure now he had won, for there was no earthly way in which his point could be struck either down or up. But see! With a gliding motion—a motion almost imperceptible—Ruric raises the sword and the other slides upon its side, and the other point, instead of touching his breast, is caught in the cross-guard of his haft. Then, quick as lightning, and with all his might, Ruric bends his elbow downward with the whole weight of his massive shoulder, and throws his wrist upward. On that instant the Greek sees and feels what meant that strange fire of the eye. He feels his point caught, but before he can close his grasp more firmly the haft is wrenched from his hand—it strikes the vaulted ceiling with a dull clang, and descending, is caught by Ruric Nevel fairly by the hilt!

For a moment all is still as death in that chamber. Ruric is the first to break the silence. He advances to the Greek, and as he hands back both swords, he says :

“Demetrius, remember your promise. I know you are a brave man, for I can see it in your forgiving glance. *You will not like me less for this?*”

“No!” the noble Greek cried, dropping both the swords, and extending both hands, which the gunmaker grasped. “I honor you! I love you!”

Peter Alexiowitz, the impetuous emperor—then in the zeal and fire of youth—leaped from his standing-place and caught Ruric by the hand.

“By St. Michael!” he cried, earnestly and loudly, “you stand clear of all blame, for full well do I now know that had you so desired you could have slain Conrad Damonoff at your first intent.”

“Sire,” answered the youth, now speaking tremulously, “twice did I disarm the count, and yet spare him. And when in my rage I broke his weapon in twain to bring him to his senses, he seized a second sword.”

“Sir Duke,” spoke the emperor, turning towards Olga, who stood trembling with rage and mortification, “you see you must have labored under a mistake. You can retire now. Not a word, sir!”

With quivering lip and trembling step the duke left the apartment, and after him went Stephen Urzen.

“Now, Ruric Nevel, if you leave Moscow without my consent, you do so at your peril. I would not lose sight of you. You are at liberty.”

In an hour more Ruric was upon his mother’s bosom. He told her all that had happened—all but the last words of the emperor. He did not tell her of those, for he knew not whether they boded him good or evil.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MASK FALLS FROM A VILLAIN'S FACE.

It was about two weeks after the events last recorded that Rosalind Valdai sat in her own apartment, with Zenobie for her companion. It was in the afternoon, and a severe storm was raging without.

"Now, Zenobie," spoke the beautiful maiden, "we have a moment alone—the first since morning. And now tell me about that black monk. What did he say his name was?"

"Vladimir."

"Ah, yes. I have heard his name, and, if I mistake not, he is a sort of mysterious being."

"He is, my mistress; and I am just as confident that I have seen him before as I am that I have seen you before."

"How? Seen him before?"

"Yes."

"But where?"

"Ah," returned the young girl with a dubious shake of the head, "there is the mystery. For the life of me I cannot tell. He knew me—he knows everybody—and yet he has not been long in the city, if one might judge from his conversation."

"But what did he stop you for? Where was it?" asked Rosalind, eagerly.

"It was in the church he stopped me—in our church of St. Stephen. He was at the altar, and he beckoned to me as I arose to come out. I went to him and he asked me about you?"

"About me?"

"Yes—and about Ruric Nevel."

"And what about us?" the maiden asked, blushing.

"He asked me if I thought you loved the young gunmaker. He was so kind—and he seemed so anxious to know—and then he seemed to take such an interest in Ruric, that I could not refuse to answer him."

"But what did you tell him?"

"I told him you did love Ruric. I told him how you had been children together—and how you would now give your hand to him sooner than to the proudest noble in the land. He asked me some things about the duke, but I would not tell him that. When I must tell of evil if I tell the truth, I will not speak if I can properly avoid it."

"You were right, Zenobie. You were very right—about this last part; but you should not have told all you knew concerning me and Ruric."

"I hope I did nothing wrong. Oh! I should be proud to acknowledge my love for such a man."

"Aye—and so am I, my little sprite. I love Ruric with my whole soul, and would be proud to give him my hand this day; but that is no reason why you should tell of it."

"Surely, my mistress, I meant no harm," the young girl cried, eagerly.

"Hush, Zenobie. I do not blame you. Only I would have you careful."

"And I would be careful. But oh! you could not have resisted him. He drew it from me almost ere I knew it. He put his questions in such a strange manner that I could not speak without telling him what he wanted to know. He did not say, 'Does she love Ruric Nevel?' but he took it for granted that such was the case, and then ere I was aware of it he had made me say so. But he surely does not mean you harm; nor does he mean harm to Ruric. He is a good man, I know."

"I wish I could see him," said Rosalind, half to herself.

"You cannot mistake him if you ever do see him, my mistress. He is a strange-looking man; and then he dresses differently from most of our church officers. He dresses all in black—to-day it was in black velvet. But his shape is his most striking characteristic. He is the fattest man in Moscow, and his chin seems to sink clear out of sight. He would be a funny man, and would make me laugh, if he did not puzzle me so."

"And did he ask you about anything else?"

"No—only he asked me if I knew how the duke stood with the emperor, and I told him I thought he stood very well. Then he said he had heard that they had had some dispute concerning the duel between the Count Damonoff and Ruric. But I told him I guessed that had resulted in no estrangement, for the duke was as much at court as ever. And after that he told me about the duel, as he was there and saw nearly the whole of the affair."

And Zenobie went on and told all that the monk related about Ruric's bravery, and Rosalind listened now

attentively and eagerly. It was a theme that pleased her. The attendant saw how gratefully the account came upon the ears of her mistress, and she closed the recital with some opinions of her own, wherein Ruric Nevel was held up as a pattern after which all men who wished to win the love of woman should be made.

But before any answer could be made by Rosalind the door of the apartment was opened, and the duke entered. He smiled very kindly as he bowed to his ward, and then, with a wave of his hand, he motioned for Zenobie to withdraw; and after the attendant was gone he took a seat close by his fair charge. The maiden looked up into his face, and though there was no very serious look there as yet, still she could plainly see that he had something of more than usual importance in his mind. She shuddered as she gazed upon him, for she could not help it. There was something in the look of the man—a sort of hidden intent which came out in his tone and glance—a deep meaning—something which he had never spoken, but which was yet manifest—that moved her thus. What it was she could not tell. It was the prompting of that instinct of the human soul which may repel an object while yet the working mind detects nothing evil.

But she was not to remain in the dark much longer. The evil one was loose, and his bonds of restraint were cast off. He had marked his prey, and the meshes were gathering about it.

“Rosalind,” the duke said, in a tone which he meant should have been easy and frank, but which, nevertheless, was marked strongly with effort, “there is some

talk among the surgeons now that Count Damonoff may recover."

"Oh, I am glad of that," Rosalind earnestly replied.

"Yes, I suppose so," resumed Olga, eyeing her sharply. "But you have no particular care for him, I presume."

"For—for—the count."

"Aye—it was of him I was speaking."

"No, sir. I care only for him as I care for all who need to become better ere they die."

"Aha—yes," said the duke, biting his lip, for in his own mind he had the frankness to acknowledge that he was about as needy of virtue as was the count. "But," he resumed with a faint smile, "you never loved the man?"

"No, sir," the maiden answered, gazing up into her guardian's face with an inquisitive look.

"So I thought—so I thought." As Olga thus spoke he smiled again, and moved his chair nearer to Rosalind. "I am well aware," he resumed, "that your affections have not yet been set upon any one who is capable of making a proper companion for you through all the ups and downs of coming life."

Rosalind's eyes drooped beneath the steady gaze of the speaker and her frame trembled. But ere she could make any reply the duke went on:

"My dear Rosalind, I have come now upon a business which I may justly call the most important of my life. I have not approached this subject lightly, nor with over zeal; but I have come to it through careful consideration and anxious study."

Here the duke stopped and gazed into Rosalind's

face. She met his gaze, and her eyes drooped again. She trembled more than before, and a dim, dreadful fear worked its way to her mind.

"Rosalind," the nobleman continued, "when I was but nineteen years of age I was married with a girl whom I loved. She lived with me four short, happy years. In that time we were blessed with two children, but they lived not long to cheer us. And then my beautiful wife died, and the world was all dark and drear to me. I thought I should never love again. Time passed on, and you were placed in my charge. When you first came I loved you; and I wondered if you were to take the place of the children I had lost. But you grew quickly up. Your mind was expanded, and your heart was large. I found that I could not make a child of you; and then I sat down all alone and asked myself what place it was you had assumed in my heart. Can you guess the answer, Rosalind?"

"As a little child," answered the maiden, trembling violently.

"No, no, sweet one. I pondered, and I studied; and I examined myself carefully; and I found that the memory of my departed wife was fast fading away before the rising of another one just as pure and just as holy. Now do you understand?"

"No, no—Oh, no!" the maiden uttered in a frightened whisper.

"Then listen further," continued the nobleman, in a low, earnest tone, and with a strange fire in his deep blue eyes: "As your charms of both mind and person were gradually developed I came to look upon you with new feelings, or, I should say, with the old feeling

*further - saying the
love story*

more fully developed. I looked around me. I saw my sumptuous palace without a legitimate female head. In my parties I had no companion to assist and guide me, and in my loneliness I had no mate to cheer and enliven me. I wished not that such should be the case. At length my eyes were opened, and I saw plainly the spirit that was moving upon my soul. I looked upon you, and I knew that I had found the woman who was to give me joy once more. Rosalind, I love you truly, fondly ; and I would make you my wife. Now you cannot fail to understand me—can you ?”

Rosalind gazed up into the face of her guardian, and she was pale as death.

“ You do not mean—Oh !”

It was a deep, painful groan, and the fair girl clasped her hands towards the man before her.

“ Hold,” he said, almost sternly. “ I am not trifling now. I am not only serious, but firm in purpose. When you were placed under my charge your father bade me do as I would ; and now I would make you my wife. The Count Damonoff was the first who came for your hand, and had he been a proper man, and had you loved him, I should have interposed no objections ; but you did not love him, and that affair is passed. Now I lay my claim upon you, and my fortune and title I lay at your feet.”

“ And what is to become of my estate ?” the maiden asked, quickly and meaningly, for the thought flashed upon her.

“ Why, we’ll have the two united,” returned the duke with some hesitation.

“No, no,” Rosalind cried; “you will not do this. Oh, spare me from such a fate!”

“Spare thee, girl? Spare thee from becoming the wife of one of the most powerful noblemen in the empire? You must be crazy.”

“My guardian,” said Rosalind, now looking her companion steadily in the face, “you only do this to try me. When you know that such a union would make me miserable forever—when you know it would cast out all the joys of life, and extinguish the last hope of peace from my soul, you surely will not press it.”

“Rosalind Valdai, I have resolved that you shall be my wife. Mind you, this is one of the firm, fixed purposes of my soul; and those who know the Duke of Tula best know that he never gives up a purpose once fixed in his mind. You cannot mistake me now.”

Slowly the stern fact dawned upon Rosalind’s mind. There had been a lingering hope that he might be only trying to see if she loved him, or if she would willingly become his wife. Awhile she remained with her head bowed, and her bosom heaving with the wild emotion thus called up, but at length she looked up and spoke:

“Sir,” she said, faintly, but with marked decision, “you cannot make me your wife.”

“Ah! and why not?”

“Because I will never consent.”

“Ah, say you so?”

“I do; and mean it.”

“Ha, ha, ha! You know little of my power if you think you can thwart me in my purpose. I tell thee, as sure as the God of heaven lives, you shall be my wife!”

“No, no. Before heaven, I protest against such an

unholy union. You cannot have my heart, and such a union would be but foul mockery."

"Oho—now you come to the point. I can't have your heart, eh? Perhaps your heart is given to the gunmaker?"

Rosalind's eyes flashed in an instant. The words of the duke were spoken sneeringly and contemptuously, and they jarred upon the fair girl's soul.

"Aye," she quickly uttered, and boldly, too, "I do love Ruric Nevel; and he is worthy of my love."

"Now, my pretty ward," resumed Olga, in a tone of peculiar irony, "you have spoken as I hoped you would speak—plainly and to the point; so I can answer just as plainly. Know, then, that Ruric Nevel can never be your husband. He stands charged with a horrid crime, and the emperor only waits to see whether the count recovers or not ere he awards the punishment. The gunmaker is forbidden, on pain of death, to leave the city. So you may cast him from your thoughts as soon as possible."

"What crime is Ruric accused of?" the maiden asked.

"Of murder."

"In wounding the count?"

"Yes."

"Oh, how can you bring your tongue to such speech? You know the noble youth was not to blame in this affair. He was—"

"Hold, Rosalind. I want no argument on this question. You have heard what I have said, and be assured that I mean it. I had hoped you would receive my proposal with more favor; but I did not enter into the

plan until my mind was all made up, and the thing all fixed. You will become my wife within a month!"

"I will flee to the emperor," gasped Rosalind.

"You will not leave this place again until you are the *Duchess of Tula*!"

"I will never speak the word that is necessary to make me your wife—never! At the altar, if you be by my side, my lips shall be sealed, and no power on earth shall loose them!"

"Do you mean this?" whispered the duke.

"As God lives, I do."

"Then mark me." The stout, dark nobleman gazed fixedly into the maiden's face as he spoke, and in his look and tone there was a fiendish expression which could not be mistaken. "Rosalind Valdai," he hissed, "you shall be my wife. My will shall be your master! And if you attempt to set me at defiance, I will find means to make you repent your audacity, with tears of anguish during every hour of your life."

With one deep, soul-dying moan, the poor girl sank down shivering and pale. The duke caught her as she fell, and having laid her senseless form back upon the couch, he strode from the apartment.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MASK FALLS AND REVEALS THE HEART.

It was early evening ere Zenobie entered the apartment of her young mistress. As she opened the door she found dark within. She moved into the room, and shading her candle with her hand, she gazed about. The wind still howled fearfully without, and the snow came driving against the windows. When the girl had reached the extremity of the place she called her mistress's name, and was answered by a low groan from the couch in the corner. Thither she hastened, and there she found her mistress.

"Rosalind! My mistress!" she cried, kneeling down.

"Who is it?" the maiden asked, starting up, and gazing frantically around.

"It is I—Zenobie. Say, my dear good mistress, what is it? What is the matter? What has happened?"

With a quick movement Rosalind put her attendant away and sat up; and having gazed about her for some moments, she murmured:

"Where am I? Who is here?"

"It is I. You are in your own chamber. Come, you are cold here."

Without resistance the maiden suffered herself to be led to the place where the heated air came up the from the furnace below, and there she sat down.

"What is it?" again asked Zenobie, eagerly. "What has happened?"

Rosalind bowed her head upon her hands, and after some moments of thought she looked up. She was very pale, and a fearful tremor shook her frame.

"Zenobie," she uttered, in a low strange whisper, "ask me no more now. I am not well. Oh, ask me no more now."

"My mistress," returned the faithful girl, placing one arm about Rosalind's neck, "you know what you may tell me, and what you may not; but whom will you trust if you trust not me? Oh, give me your love, and if I can serve you let me do so."

"I would trust you with life itself," the maiden replied; "and some time you shall know all that has happened here; but not now—not now. Oh, I cannot speak it now."

"Say no more, my mistress; only let me serve you. You will have some refreshment—something to eat?"

"You may bring me some wine, Zenobie."

And thereupon the young girl hastened away.

In the meantime the duke was in his private room below. He was pacing to and fro across the floor with his hands behind him, and his brow was dark and lowering. Ever and anon he would stop near the door and listen, and then proceed. At length there came a rap upon the door, and the duke said "Enter." It was a priest who entered the apartment—a small, deformed man, somewhat about fifty years of age. His face was very dark; his features sharp and angular; his eyes dark and sunk deep into his head; his brow heavy above the eyes, where the shaggy brows hung over, but

sloping back from thence, leaving the points where phrenologists locate Benevolence and Veneration deficient and flat. Upon his shoulders he wore a huge, ungainly hump ; and, all in all, he was just such a man as a timid person would shun. His name was Savotano. The duke had been the means of getting him into the church, and in consideration thereof he had bound himself to do the duke's evil work. But this was not all.

Some years before there had been a murder in Moscow, and Savotano did the bloody deed. It was a work of pure vengeance. Olga had him apprehended ; but he was not brought to justice. The duke found him to be a shrewd, unscrupulous wretch, willing to serve those who would pay him well, and ready to let himself then to any one who could save his life. Olga was a man of plots and schemes. He fancied that such a man as Savotano might be of use to him ; so he proposed to save the wretch if he would serve *him*. The villain was glad enough to accept the proposition, and the bargain was made. Could Savotano enter the church, and assume the sacred garb, he might in many cases work to better advantage. The wretch readily agreed to this, too ; and through Olga's powerful influence he gained a place in the church. He knew that the duke held his very life, and he failed not to serve him. His clerical robes shielded him from suspicion ; and, moreover, the place gave him additional advantages to work at his diabolical trade. His salary from government was sufficient for his support, while an occasional sum from his master enabled him to enjoy many of those luxuries which were denied to most of his brethren. Olga feared

not to trust this man, for the fellow had nothing to gain by betrayal, but everything to lose.

And such was the man who now entered the duke's private room. He entered with a bold air, for though he was somewhat in the duke's power, yet there was a peculiar satisfaction in knowing that when he fell the noble lord must fall with him, part way, at least. Brethren in crime cannot count much upon respect:

"I have come, my lord," the priest said, as he shook the snow from his robe, and then took a seat by the furnace-pipe.

"And how is the count?" asked Olga.

"He is recovering, I am sure."

"Does Kopani say so?"

"Yes. He says he will have him out within a month."

"No, no! Savotano, this must not be."

"But tell me, my lord, what is the particular need of the count's departing?"

The duke gazed his visitor a few moments in the face, and then he said:

"Why, since the affair interests you, I'll tell you. Thus far I have paid you promptly all your dues, but I cannot do so much longer unless we can make some of our points work. My property is on the decrease fast. I have not enough left to live on. Within the past three years I have made some bad ventures. I put into—But never mind—suffice it for me to say that I am at the end of my fortune."

The duke was about to say that he had placed large sums in the hands of the Minister Galitzin for the purpose of carrying out the conspiracy by which the

Princess Sophia was to have been placed upon the throne, with Galitzin for her prime minister, and himself also high in power. He chose not to tell of this—and no wonder, for heads had ere then be taken to pay for such indiscretions.

“And now, if this count survives, I thus have one source cut off. My half of Drotzen is used up and mortgaged to him, but if he dies the whole comes to me. His father and myself married sisters, and they owned Drotzen, and on his side the count is the only heir; so in the event of his death the whole comes to me. You understand this now.”

“Perfectly,” returned the priest. “And ’tis a pity your first effort did not succeed.”

“So it is,” said the duke, uneasily. “When I sent him with that message to the gunmaker I felt sure he would be slain, and then I hoped that the other could be disposed of for having slain him. But the emperor has turned all my plans upside down, for the present, at least. Savotano, you must have a hand in Damon-off’s medicine!”

“That is easily done, my lord,” replied the priest, quietly.

“You have free access there?”

“Yes.”

“And can you not watch with him some night?”

“I think I can.”

“Then do so. When he is dead two hundred ducats are yours.”

“Then he dies!”

“Good! And now there is one more. This gunmaker must be got out of the way.”

"Ah," uttered Savotano, looking up incredulously.
"Do you mean so?"

"Most assuredly I do."

"But why him?"

"Do you fear to undertake the work?"

"Not at all, my lord; I only wished to know why he was wanted out of the way."

"The reason is simple. I must marry with Rosalind Val dai. Her property is worth the whole of Drotzen twice told—over two million of ducats."

"So much?" uttered the priest, opening his eyes with greedy wonder.

"Yes; it is one of the finest estates in Moscow, and it pays her now a yearly income of a hundred thousand ducats. She does not know it. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the priest in concert. "She doesn't, eh?"

"No—she knows nothing about it. But I must secure this; and in order to do this I must marry her; and—if I would be *sure* of that this accursed gunmaker must be got out of the way."

"But what is he to her?"

"She loves him."

"And is not your authority—"

"Hold, Savotano. I'll explain to you, in a few words I'm afraid the emperor has taken a fancy to this youngster, and if he has he may be appealed to in this case. The girl will take marriage hard. I shall have to hire you to perform the ceremony."

"Which I should be pleased to do," returned the priest with a coarse smile.

"You shall have the opportunity. But first we must have this young Nevel taken care of."

"I think I can manage that, my lord."

"And how will you do it?"

"I suppose you don't want him put where he can get off and come back here."

"No. Finish him while you are about it!"

"I will."

"But mind: It must be done so that in no possible way suspicion can fall upon me. You must contrive some way so that suspicion shall be led at once to some apparent point and there baffled."

"Leave me alone for that, my lord. I can call help if I want it."

"Are there not places in the city where a body can be hidden?—where they may be so disposed of as never to be found?" asked the duke, as the thought came to his mind.

"Never mind," returned the other, with a confident nod of the head. "If I meddle with the matter, it shall be well done."

"Very well. I'll trust it with you."

For a few moments after this there was a dead silence, during which only the moaning of the wind could be heard. But at length the duke started up, and with sudden energy he said:

"Ah, Savotano, there is one thing I came nigh forgetting. You have heard of this strange monk—Vladimir his name is."

"Aye—and I have seen him, too. You mean that huge lump of human fat?"

"Yes. And now tell me who and what he is. He was

at the duel ; and I know he has been here to my house. Who is he ?”

“ You ask me too much, my lord, for I can tell you no more about him than I can about the man in the moon. In short, no one seems to know him, save that he is a monk of some Roman order, and named Vladimir. He has been here only a few months, as near as I can find out. And yet I think I know what his business is or, at least, why he’s here.”

“ Ah—you suspect.”

“ Yes—and if my suspicions be correct we could have him taken care of at any moment.”

“ Explain.”

“ Why—I think he is a spy of the pope—sent here from Rome to learn something of our emperor’s plans.”

“ But he has not visited the imperial palace.”

“ O, yes, my lord. He has been there several times ; and once the emperor himself was obliged to send him out of the audience chamber.”

“ But have you any particular reasons for thinking him a spy from the pope ?”

“ Why—he is a Romish monk ; and he hangs about the most important places in our city. Even the circumstance I have just related—his trying to remain in the audience chamber while private business was going on, and having to be ordered out by the emperor, is some ground for suspicion. I mean to watch him, at all events.”

“ That’s right,” returned the duke. And then, after a moment’s thought, he added—“ I do not see why he should be around after every petty duel that may be fought, if he is a spy from Rome. And besides, I have

heard one or two persons say that they were sure they had seen him before."

"O, that may be only the result of some strong resemblance which he bears to some one else. I am sure he was never here before—not in Moscow."

Again the hump-backed priest was cautioned about the work he had in hand, and having promised over and over again to be very careful, he took his leave.

And Olga, Duke of Tula, was left alone with his own thoughts. Better for him had that wicked priest been his executioner! Better for him had he been upon the count's bed, racked with dying pains! Better for him had he been a poor gunmaker, so he had been honest! Oh! better for him had he been the meanest beggar that walked the earth, than what he was! But he did not realize this. He had a goal ahead, and he tried to overlook the black, dreadful gulf that yawned between him and it!

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

The news went out that the Count Conrad Damonoff must die. A few days before, the best surgeon in Moscow said he would recover; but now that same surgeon said he must fall. A strange change had come over him; it was not a fever, but rather a consuming of vitality. He was failing fast, and no art of medicine could revive him. Some thought he must be bleeding inwardly, but others knew better than this, because in that case there would be some outward symptom. The wound itself was healing, but the disease was not. The physician and the priest were now in daily, and the former in almost hourly, attendance. The surgeon was Kopani, and the priest was the hump-backed Savotano!

Thus lay the count upon his bed, weak and faint, but at present almost free from pain, and an old woman was his only attendant, the priest having just left. It was just after noon. The dying man had just taken a powerful stimulating draught, though it was against the injunctions of the priest, as he said that by such means the invalid might die bereft of sense, and thus lose his hold upon salvation—he had just taken this draught when there was a low rap upon the door. The woman arose to

answer the summons. She conversed a few moments with the girl who had knocked, and when she returned to the bed she announced that Ruric Nevel wished to enter.

"Let him come in," whispered the count.

"But—"

"Never mind," he interrupted, as the woman commenced thus to expostulate. "Let him come in. If he is my enemy let me see him. It may serve to arouse me."

So the woman went to the door again, and soon afterwards Ruric Nevel entered the apartment. He stepped lightly, noiselessly, to the bedside, but it was moments ere he could distinguish objects by the subdued light of the place. By and by, however, he overcame the difficulty, and he started back in horror as he beheld the features of his adversary. How pale and sunken! How deathlike and ghastly! The count noticed the movement and he noticed the look.

"Conrad Damonoff," said the gunmaker, in a low, solemn tone, "a few days since I heard that you were recovering, and I thanked God. But to-day they told me you were dying, and I have come to ask that I may take your hand ere you pass away from earth. As God is my Maker and my Judge, I would rather lie down here and die for you than have you pass away with a curse of me upon your soul or on your lips. Forgive me for what I have done, and never again will I engage in such a wicked work. For my own life, it is my country's and my mother's, and I have no right to throw it away; and

my antagonist's life is the sacred property of God, which I have no right to touch but in self-defence. Forgive me."

Slowly and heavily moved the dying man over, and then he extended his thin and wasted hand.

"Ruric," he said—and his voice was stronger now, for the potion was working—"I am glad you have come—very glad; for I have wished, above all else of earth, to see you. I could not send for you, for I knew not how you might come. I have been all wrong in the things that have passed betwixt thee and me. I was mad, and a fool. I blame you not; but rather do I thank you for your kindness through all this scene. I forgive you with all my heart; and now tell me that I am forgiven!"

"Forgiven!" repeated Ruric, with a trembling lip, still holding the count's hand within both his own. "Oh, would to God I could call you back to life! Forgiven? God, who reads all hearts, knows how humble, how sacred is my forgiveness to you! Could I call you back—could I wipe out the past from my memory, I could die content."

"Enough," returned the count warmly. "This was my dearest wish, though pride has kept back its utterance. I feared you would gloat over my death—that you would be glad when I was gone."

"No, no—I should have been a monster then."

"There are many such. And yet I wronged you by the thought. But I could not help it."

A moment more passed in silence, and then the invalid resumed:

"There is one reason why I should like to live; I should be prepared for a better life. Since death has come—since I have known that he stood waiting by my bed—I have wondered at the evil life I have led; and I have thought that if the dark king would let me remain here a few years more I could be a better man. But 'tis too late now. The die is cast. Yet I have some joy in this. You have shed a happy light upon my dying hour. God bless you."

Ruric's feelings were easily moved, and there was something in the deep solemnity of this occasion that started his heart to a tender mood, and the last words of the dying man overflowed the cup. He bowed his head, and covering his eyes with one hand, while he held in the other the hand of Conrad, he wept freely and silently.

At this moment the woman arose and left the room.

"She's gone," said the count, after he had recovered somewhat from the deep emotions which had been stirred within his own soul. "Sit down here beside me."

Ruric obeyed the request, and after he had seated himself he gazed sadly into the sick man's face.

"Say, Ruric," the count asked, while an eager look overspread his face, "was't true what Kopani told me that you overcame Demetrius the Greek with the sword?"

"I did," the youth replied, in a whisper.

"But you did not disarm him?—you did not fairly take his sword from him?"

"I did, Conrad."

"My soul, is it possible? And where have you been all your life?"

"In Moscow and in Spain."

"And yet obscure."

"Never mind that now," interposed Ruric. "I have something of more interest. Do you— But you will pardon me for what I may say, for I assure you I mean it all for your good."

"Speak on," said Conrad, at the same time running his eyes almost enviously over the gunmaker's nobly-developed breast and shoulders.

"Then, first—I have just come from the lady Rosalind. Ah! I meant not—"

"Go on. I may have felt a pang at the mention of that name, but I know she loves you, and were I strong at this moment as ever I'd relinquish all claims of her to you. So fear not."

"Thank you, Count, for this. But I was remarking: I am not long from her presence, and between us both we have suspected some dark things. Do you think the duke was really your friend?"

The count started, and a strange gleam shot from his eyes.

"Go on," he uttered.

"Then listen: Before you ever came to my shop the duke had most solemnly promised Rosalind that she should receive no more trouble from you—that you would claim her hand no more."

"Do you know this?"

"I do."

"But it cannot be. Why should he have sent me on that mission to you?"

"I had taught one of his officers the sword exercise, and he knew I was your superior in strength and the use of the weapon."

"Well—go on," whispered the count, nervously and anxiously.

"Why—he thought very likely that we should not meet on such a question without a quarrel. He knew your natural impetuosity and my strength of arm, and he hoped you—would fall."

"But—go on!"

"His estate is running out, and he wants the whole of Drotzen!"

"Ah! I see it now!"

"The duke has proposed himself for Rosalind's hand," resumed Ruric. "He says he has loved her long, and he will force her to wed him if he can, though it break her heart!"

"Ha!" gasped the count, fairly starting up to a sitting posture. "How blind I have been! By my soul, he never was cordial—never kind."

Ruric gently laid the sick man back, and then he said:

"From all I can see and understand, the proud duke meant to get all your wealth and all of Rosalind's."

The count spoke not yet. He lay with his eyes closed, and groaned in the agony of the strange revelations that were breaking in upon him.

But see? Why starts Ruric so suddenly?—and why does he turn so pale? Why do his hands tremble?—and why is his brow bent so eagerly?

"What is it?" asked the count, startled by the strange event.

"Hold!" whispered Ruric, in a frantic tone. "You were recovering once?"

"From this wound?"

"Yes."

"Yes. I was getting well fast, and the doctor said I

should be stout and well in a month. But suddenly this change came on. Let's see—on Friday morning I felt the first relapse."

"The very time!" gasped Ruric to himself.

The count moved his head forward, and would have caught his companion by the hand if he could. "For mercy's sake, Ruric, what is it?"

"As I came this way I saw a hump-backed priest pass out from this house?" said the gunmaker, interrogatively.

"Yes, yes," returned the count, speaking shortly and quickly. "It was Savotano. He has attended me. The duke recommended him."

"And was he here Thursday night?"

"Thursday? Ah—yes—he watched with me that night."

"And has he been in attendance since?"

"Yes—every day. But why do you ask? Say—what is that meaning upon your face? What is it?"

At this moment the door of the apartment was quietly, noiselessly opened, and Kopani, the surgeon, entered the place.

"Ha!" cried Ruric, starting towards him, and grasping him by the arm, "your patient is poisoned! A deadly poison has been given him, and it is even now eating his life away!"

"Impossible!" gasped the surgeon, straining his eyes to see plainly who it was that spoke to him. "Ah," he uttered, as he became somewhat used to the gloom of the apartment, "is it you, sir?"

"Aye, but mind not that now. Cannot you do something for the count? He has been poisoned!"

"It cannot be!"

"I am! I am!" cried Conrad Damonoff, starting up to a sitting posture; "he speaks the truth! That accursed priest! Oh, Olga! Olga! I never dreamed that thou wast mine enemy!"

"But what is it all?" the surgeon asked, gazing first upon Ruric and then upon the count. "Speak, some one."

"Tell him," groaned Conrad.

"Listen," said the gunmaker. "I have my suspicions, but mind you, they are founded on facts, and the facts are these: The Duke of Tula is well-nigh free from the possession of property. His half of Drotzen is all mortgaged, and he wants the other half. That other half he cannot have while Damonoff lives. The duke, too, has sworn that Rosalind Valdai shall be his wife—so he would have her property also. This hump-backed priest is Olga's special tool. It was Olga got him into the church, and it was Olga who freed him more than once from deserved punishment. Last Thursday evening he was with the duke in private council, and he came from thence directly to this place. Now you can judge for yourself."

The surgeon started slightly, and then he bowed his head. A few moments he remained thus, and then he leaped up and clasped his hands.

"You are right," he cried. "It is! it is! There is no burning up, as I thought, of icy, wintry fire; but the fiendish work is from a human hand! Hold!—I know the symptoms. I know them now. Be quiet, Conrad. It may not yet be too late."

As the surgeon spoke he hastily opened a small

leathern case he carried with him, and from thence he took a powerful emetic. The woman was sent for, and when she came she obtained warm water. The potion was given—a small quantity at a time—at intervals of about five minutes, until the desired effect was produced. A strange mass of stuff was thrown up, and Kopani took it to the light and examined it. Most of it was of dark, brownish color, but with streaks of yellow, and coarse blotches of red and green. The yellow substance was of a mucous formation, while the red and green seemed to be more liquid.

“’Tis poison!” the surgeon said; “and it has been administered in small quantities.”

“And cannot something be done?” asked Ruric, eagerly. “Oh! save him if you can! save him, and I’ll bless you ever. You can—oh! say you can!”

The surgeon caught the youth by the hand. There was something in this noble spirit that moved him—and he knew now that all must have been forgiven between the two men.

“I’ll try,” he said, “I have antidotes with me. All is not lost yet.”

“Then hasten,” urged Ruric, half crazed beneath the might of the strange discovery, which he had thus helped to make.

“Be not uneasy. I will see that he suffers not for want of human skill.” And as the surgeon thus spoke he moved to the side-board and fixed on an antidote; but he did not give it until the invalid had vomited all he could.

“Hold!” cried Ruric, as the surgeon took up the

wine-bottle to mix the antidote with. "Touch not a thing here. Perhaps, the villain has poisoned them all!"

"So it may be," Kopani said, setting down the bottle. He then turned to the woman, who had remained standing by the fire like one in a trance, and asked her to bring a fresh bottle of wine. She quickly obeyed, and when she was gone Kopani took all the articles upon the table and set them on one side. He would not throw them away, for he meant to analyze them.

When the woman returned Kopani mixed the new potion, and administered it, and ere long afterwards the count fell asleep.

"Ruric Nevel," said the surgeon, as soon as he was sure the invalid would sleep, "will you remain here awhile? I wish to go and analyze some of these things. I have only to go to the Academy. I will be back in an hour at the furthest."

The gunmaker gladly consented to this; and having gathered up the phials and the wine-bottle, and concealed them beneath his pelisse, the surgeon left.

Ruric Nevel was happier now, for hope was with him while he prayed that God might spare the unfortunate count.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ASTOUNDING AFFAIR.

Half an hour had the gunmaker sat by the side of the sick man's bed when he was aroused from the reverie into which he had fallen by the gentle opening of the door. He turned and beheld a human form emerging from the narrow, dark entry way. As it came into the room the watcher started, for he beheld the hump-backed priest, Savotano.

"Who is here?" the arch fiend whispered, shading his eyes and trying to peer into the gloom.

"—sh!" whispered Ruric. "The count is asleep."

By this time our hero had so far overcome the first emotion caused by the villain's entrance that he could be calm.

"And who is this?" the priest whispered, moving nearer to the bed. "Ha! The gunmaker!"

"Yes," replied the youth, watching every look and movement of the fellow most closely.

"You are in a strange place, I should say," Savotano whispered, not looking the young man directly in the face, but casting upon him a sidelong glance, as though he dared not look direct.

"Speak not too loud, Sir Priest," said our hero, determined to enter into no conversation with the man if he could avoid it. "Do not awaken the count, for he is very faint and weak."

And then Ruric had another reason. He feared if Damonoff should awake that the strange discovery they had made might be revealed; and, of course, he wished not that the villain should yet know how well he was understood.

"But why are you here?" pursued Savotano, who seemed determined to know. "I am this poor man's spiritual comforter, and I surely have a right to know wherefore is the presence of one bearing the peculiar relations towards him which are sustained by you."

Ruric's first impulse was one of disgust and wrath, but he managed to keep it to himself.

"Sir Priest," he returned, moving his chair noiselessly nearer to the visitor, so that his whisper might not disturb the sleeper, "I heard that the count was dying, and I would not have him die without first forgiving me for all that I had done."

"And has he done it?"

"He has."

"And why do you remain here? Where is his attendant?"

"She is out somewhere. The count has had a strange fit—a startling spasm—and I feared if he had another the woman could not manage him alone."

"Ah," uttered Savotano. "A spasm!"

"Yes, a most strange one—as though something were at his heart—as though his brain were on fire, and his whole system shaking."

The priest turned his head away, but Ruric saw plainly the exultant look which rested there. There was no mistaking any more. That one look—for Ruric saw it—was proof enough.

"Well, well," the misshapen villain said, "I will call again when he is awake. I would not have him die, and I not by him."

Thus speaking, Savotano arose, and moved towards the door. His step was eager, and his every look betrayed some anxious purpose. He stopped as he reached the door and looked back, but he did not speak. Ruric was afraid he might go to the side-board to look at the medicine, but he did not. He simply cast one more glance at the watcher, and then left the room.

In half an hour more the surgeon returned. His face wore a clear, emphatic expression, and his movements were all quick and prompt, as though each one was for the purpose of announcing some self-evident decision.

"Well," he said, with a quickly drawn breath, "we have put the medicine to a test." And then he leaned back and looked into Ruric's face.

"And what did you find?" the young man asked.

"Just what we had expected. We have detected arsenic in three of the medicines which the count had to take; but this poison is not alone. There is much opium in the wine, even so that we could smell it when our suspicions guided us. The poison has been most adroitly fixed. The priest must have one of those recipes which have been used by scientific poisoners, for no physician in Moscow could have concocted the deadly poison."

"But wherein was it so wondrously peculiar?" asked Ruric, with interest.

"Why—in this: Arsenic was the principal poisoning

poison

agent, but that alone would produce symptoms which any physician would know at once. In this case there was something present which overcame all the outward signs of the poison, and only let it eat upon the vitals. I know not the secret, though I know there is such an one. Had it not been for your fortunate suspicions the count would have died, and we should have supposed he only died from the effects of the wound. The poison was working silently, and surely—without pain, and without outward sign different from the usual sinking of the worn and fainting body. But I have hopes now. The villain must not know that we have discovered him. We will let the thing run for the present.”

Kopani was not a little surprised when he found that the priest had been there during his absence, but before he could make any further remark the count awoke. He felt very faint, but that strange sickness at the stomach was lessened. The surgeon prepared some suitable diluents, and having called in the woman he gave directions that they should be given in large quantities; and also directed her to prepare some strong barley water for the patient to drink as he wanted beverage.

All the phials were replaced upon the sideboard, and then refilled with liquids somewhat like those they had before contained; but the nurse was directed not to use them. Everything that her patient was to take she was to keep under her own charge in the kitchen; and she was also most particularly cautioned against allowing the priest to gain anything from her. But Kopani meant to be sure on that score. He had a little business to transact, and then he was coming back to spend

the night himself by the count's side. He meant, at all events, that the poisoner should have no more opportunity to exercise his diabolical science upon the sick nobleman. He promised the count that he should have safe and competent watchers thereafter.

It was fairly dark now, as Ruric could see by raising the curtain and looking out. He had no idea it was so late. Time had passed without his notice. He moved to the side of the bed and took the invalid's hand.

"I must go now," he said, "but if you are willing I will come again—"

"You will come," cried Conrad, in reply, returning the grasp of the hand with all his feeble power. "Oh! you must come often now. I hope I shall live. Perhaps I shall. If I do, I shall owe that life to you. And God knows—for the feeling is even now firm in my soul—that I shall always remember how you saved me; and I will never think, never, of the sad blow you struck me. Come—come to me when you can, for now—now—as God lives I speak the truth—now I love you!"

"God bless and keep you," murmured Ruric, in a husky, tremulous voice; and with these words, coming from the very depths of his soul, he turned away and left the room. He heard the voice of the count as he moved the door open, and thanked God that 'twas a blessing which fell upon his ears.

Ah, those who know not what true forgiveness is, know not the holiest emotion of earth!

Ruric had left his sledge at a neighboring inn, and as soon as he gained the street he bent his steps that way. He had not gone half the distance from the residence of the count to the inn, and was just upon the point of

crossing the street, when he heard his name pronounced by some one behind him. He stopped and looked around, and saw a man approaching him.

It was too dark to distinguish faces plainly, even at a usual conversational distance; yet Ruric was not long in concluding that the man who had thus hailed him was a stranger. He was a medium sized man, and so closely enveloped in his bonnet and pelisse that his form and features would have been hidden, even had it been lighter than it was.

"Did you speak to me?" asked the youth, as the man came up.

"Yes, sir. Is your name Ruric Nevel?"

"It is."

"Then you are wanted a few moments at the residence of a lieutenant named Orsa."

"Alaric Orsa?" asked Ruric.

"The same."

"But he does not live here in the Kremlin."

"He is here now, at any rate, and would see you."

"But you said he was at his residence," suggested our hero, who was fearful that some evil might be meant for him.

"I know nothing to the contrary, sir," the stranger returned, promptly. "All I can say is—Alaric Orsa has fallen upon the ice, and hurt himself severely, and upon being informed that you were near by with a sledge, he asked that you might be sent for."

"Hurt himself, has he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Badly?"

"I believe no bones are broken, but he is so badly sprained that he cannot walk."

"Ah—then perhaps he wants me to carry him home."

"I can't say as to that, sir. They only sent me to find you. I don't know the man myself."

There was something so frank in the statement thus made that Ruric believed it all honest, and he stood no longer in doubt.

"I will go," he said; "but lead the way quickly, for I have no time to waste."

"I will lead as fast as you will want to follow," answered the man.

And thus speaking he turned back, and having gone some dozen rods by the way they had both come, he turned down a narrow street which led towards the river. Half way down this he went, and then he turned again—this time to the left—and thus Ruric found himself in a narrow, dark lane, within which the snow was deep and almost untrodden.

"Look you," cried the youth, stopping as he found himself over knees in snow, "I think we have gone about far enough in this direction."

"This is the shortest way," said the stranger guide, apologetically. "I did not think the snow was so deep here. But it's only in the next street."

"Then on you go."

Again the stranger started, and Ruric followed. The lane was a crooked one, and more than once the youth had another inclination to stop. He had no direct fear, but yet he had some just grounds for doubt. Had he not seen what had been attempted against the

count he might have had no such doubts now ; but as it was, he thought that if one attempt had been made to ruin him through the emperor's displeasure by the man who was now trying to murder the count, it would not be at all improbable that some more effective plan should be adopted towards him. He was pondering thus when they came to a cross lane full as narrow as the one they had been traversing, into which the guide turned.

"Look you once more, sirrah," cried the youth, now stopping short. "Do you call this a street?"

"Yes, sir ; and on this street we shall find the man we seek. It is only a short cut from where he is to the inn where your horse is ; so you won't have to retrace these dubious ways. Only a little further, sir."

"But I don't like this."

"Why, bless you, sir, if you wish to go direct to the inn where your horse is, this will be the nearest way."

"Well, on you go."

And on they went again—now slipping on the ice—now in the snow to their knees—and anon stumbling along over frozen huddles and deep holes. At length the guide stopped and opened a small gate which was fixed in a high, thick, brick wall. Ruric hesitated here again. He had no weapon of any kind. If he had had even a pistol, or a sword, he would have cared not. But he did not show his thoughts to his guide. The gate opened with a creak upon its frosty hinges, and by the dim starlight the youth could see an open court beyond, and, further still, a house of some kind loomed up.

"This place seems not to be used much," remarked

Ruric, as he saw the snow in the court was trodden but little—only one or two tracks being visible from the gate to the house.

“Ah—yes—you said—what?”

“I said this place didn’t seem to be used much,” the youth repeated, though he was sure the fellow heard the first time.

“Ah! yes—a—the usual entrance is the other way, by the sledge path.”

“And where is that?” Ruric asked, not being able to see any such path.

“O—it’s around on the other side.”

By this time they had reached the door of the house, which our hero could now see, had an old, dilapidated appearance, and the guide plied the iron knocker with zeal. Ere long a man made his appearance with a lantern in his hand.

“Ah!—has the gunmaker come?” the latter asked.

“Yes,” returned the guide.

“Well—I’m glad he’s here, but I don’t believe Orsa is fit to move,” said the first speaker. And then turning to Ruric he said:

“But I’m glad you’ve come, sir, for the lieutenant wishes to see you very much. This way, sir.”

This was all so frank and prompt that the young man began to think he had been a fool for being frightened. He followed the man with the lantern into the hall, and from thence down a long flight of stairs into a basement. The lantern did not give much light, but it was sufficient to reveal the fact that the house was an old one, and not very large, for Ruric could see windows upon the opposite side of the hall which looked out of

doors. As he reached the foot of the stairs he found himself upon a brick floor, and he saw that the walls were of stone. A little further on a door was opened, and this led to a small apartment within which was a fireplace and a good fire burning.

"There, good sir," said the second guide, "if you will wait a few moments, I will go and see how the lieutenant is."

As soon as Ruric was left alone he looked about him. The room was of moderate size for a small house, and the idea of inhabiting the cellars was a common one in Moscow in the winter season. The windows, two in number, were closed up to the ceiling, and very small, and were patched with pieces of board in two or three places. Ere long the man came back, and with him came three others, one of whom the youth recognized as the individual who had conducted him to the house.

"Orsa will see you, sir," said he with the lantern.

Ruric arose to follow him, the other three men approaching the fire as though they would remain there. He had reached the door and passed through into the room beyond, when he thought he heard footsteps behind him. It was a sliding, shuffling sound, and he turned his head to see what it was. As he did so he received a blow which staggered him, and which would have felled an ordinary man to the floor. He gathered himself quickly up, but before he could fairly turr about he received a second blow, heavier than the first, which brought him upon his knees. In an instant all four of the men were upon him, and he could see that they had ropes in their hands with which to bind him. With all his might he threw the fellow who held his

right hand back against the wall, and another he sent in an opposite direction, and in a moment more he would have been upon his feet; but just at that instant a noose was adroitly slipped over his head, and as the rope tightened about his neck he was drawn back upon the brick floor again.

"Now resist any more, and we'll choke you as sure as fate," cried the man who had held the lantern, and who now had a hold upon the rope.

"Oh," groaned Ruric, while the massive cords worked like cables in his arms and shoulders, "give me a fair chance. Let me be up and free—then lock your doors, if you please."

"No, no, good sir," replied the ruffian, with a wicked smile. "We know your power, and we are not disposed to test it further. We have had trouble enough already. Shall we—"

The man stopped speaking, for at that moment another noose was slipped down over Ruric's head, and ere he could avoid it, it had been drawn tightly about his arms. He was now at the mercy of his captors, and having rolled him over upon his breast, they proceeded to secure his arms behind him, which being done, they bade him arise. Of course he could have no desire to lie upon the cold bricks, and he got upon his feet as well as he could.

"Now, Ruric Nevel, I will conduct you to your own apartment," said the leader of the gang.

"But wherefore is this?" the gunmaker gasped, rendered almost speechless with the mingled emotions of surprise and anger. "Why have you done this? Whose hirelings are you, that you thus waylay and

seize upon an honest man, who has done no harm to any of you?"

"Never mind that now, sir," the ruffian coolly answered; "suffice it for you to know that you are safe for the present."

"But will you not tell me what this is for? There is some intent."

"Yes—and come with me and you shall see. Come."

Thus speaking the man turned once more, and having picked up his lantern he moved on, while the others, taking Ruric by the arms, followed after. The prisoner made no resistance now, for he knew that it would be useless. At a short distance another flight of stairs was reached.

"Down here?" cried Ruric, with a shudder.

"Of course. You'd freeze up here."

These words struck harshly upon the youth's soul, for they meant that he was to be detained in this lonesome place.

At the bottom of these stairs they came to a vaulted passage, at the end of which was a door. This was opened, and Ruric was led through into the place beyond. He cast his eyes quickly about, and he found himself in a narrow apartment, the walls and floor of which were of stone, and the roof of brick, the latter being arched. In one corner was a couch, and upon it were some old skins.

And here the youth was to be left. His guide simply pointed to the low couch, and then turned away. Ruric asked a question, but it was not answered. In a few moments more the heavy door was closed upon him, and he was in total darkness. He sought the couch, and with a deep groan he sank down!

CHAPTER XII.

A CONFERENCE, AND HOW IT WAS INTERRUPTED.

Rosalind Val dai and Zenobie were together in their sitting-room, and the former had been weeping. She looked paler than when we saw her before, and her brow was heavy. Smiles no longer crept about the dimples of her cheeks, and her eyes had a sad, mournful look. Her face plainly showed that she had suffered much.

"My dear mistress," urged the faithful Zenobie, throwing her arms about Rosalind's neck, and drawing her head upon her bosom, "weep no more. Oh, there must be some hope! My mistress, are you sure the duke will persist in this?"

"Aye, Zenobie, I know he will," Rosalind answered, while the old shudder came back to her frame, and the old grief to her soul.

"And have you no hope?"

"Only one—in Ruric. He may help me."

"I hope he can. He is a noble man."

Rosalind answered with a look of gratitude, and Zenobie proceeded:

"Where is the titled lord more noble than he? Oh, were I to choose a husband now, and he was free, and I were in your position, I'd choose Ruric Nevel before all the emperors of earth!"

"So would I," murmured the fair maiden.

"If I were a countess, as you are, how I should love to make such a man a count."

"But my marrying him would not make him a count. Were he a count, and I like what he is now in station, his marrying me would give me the title; but we poor women do not have that power."

"Well—then we should so much the more have the right to choose our own husbands."

Rosalind made no verbal answer, but her look showed that she sympathized with the sentiment.

"My mistress," at length spoke Zenobie again, this time in a low whisper,—“why may we not leave this place?”

Rosalind started as though she had heard the speech of a spirit, and for a moment a look of hope gleamed upon her face; but it quickly passed away.

"Alas! where should we go?"

This was a part of the plan which Zenobie had not thought of; and ere she could make any reply, one of the female domestics entered the apartment and announced that a woman wished to see her young mistress. Rosalind asked who it was, but the girl could only tell her that it was a middle-aged woman, and very good-looking. The young countess bade Zenobie go down and conduct her up. Ere long afterwards the attendant returned, and with her came Claudia Nevel. Rosalind had not seen her for over a year, but she knew her at once, and starting up from her seat, she bounded forward and embraced her warmly.

"Ah, Aunt Claudia, I am glad you have come. You will let me call you aunt, as I did in those happy times gone by."

"Aye, sweet Rosalind," returned the widow, imprinting a warm kiss upon the fair white brow.

The countess noticed the strange sadness of Madame Nevel's tone, and then, for the first time, also, she noticed the sadness of her look.

"Aunt Claudia, you look sad," she said, while a chill dread struck to her heart.

"Aye," the widow uttered, as though she were afraid to venture the question she wished to ask. "I have been very sad, because I have had a terrible fear. Has—has—not Ruric been here?"

"When?" asked the maiden, catching the whole fear now.

"Within these three days?"

"Just then. Day before yesterday he was here—in the forenoon."

"And I have not seen him since!" the poor woman groaned.

"Not seen him? Ruric gone? Oh! where, where?"

"He said he was going to see the Count Damonoff when he left here," interposed Zenobie, who joined in the grief.

"Aye—so he told me," returned the mother. "I have been there, and they have not seen him since that evening. The surgeon who attends the count went out to the inn where Ruric put up his horse, and the animal was still there, his owner having not called there for him."

"Oh! God have mercy!" ejaculated the young countess, in a paroxysm of grief.

At this moment there came a rap upon the door, and

Zenobie went to answer the summons. It was the black monk, Vladimir, who thus demanded admittance. At any other time both Rosalind and Claudia might have been startled by the strange visit, but now they instinctively hailed his coming as a source of hope.

"Ladies," spoke the fat monk, approaching the spot where they stood, and bowing very low, "you will pardon this unseemly method of gaining admission here, but I had no other choice, for I feared the duke would refuse me did I apply to him. I have come to learn, if possible, where Ruric Nevel may be."

The widow tried to answer, but instead of speaking she burst into tears. Rosalind struggled a moment with the deep emotions that stirred within her, and then she too fell to weeping. Zenobie was obliged to answer.

"Good father," she said, "we are all seeking the same knowledge. His poor mother has come here to try if she might find some clew to the noble youth; and thus did my mistress gain the first intelligence that he was gone. Pray, good sir, do you know anything about him? What have you heard?"

Both Claudia and the countess now raised their heads, for they would hear what reply the monk could make.

"I only know that he is missing," Vladimir replied. "A little while ago I called upon the sick count, and there I learned that Ruric Nevel had mysteriously disappeared. And I learned, also, of the noble purpose for which he visited the count."

"Aye," interposed Claudia, with sudden energy, "he went to try and gain the count's forgiveness. I don't

think they spoke falsely there. I don't think any there would wish him harm from any lingering revenge."

"No, no," returned the monk; "his mission thither was most nobly fulfilled. But," he continued, relapsing into perplexity, "I cannot imagine what has become of him. But hold—my dear child—is there not a hump-backed, ungainly priest who sometimes visits your guardian?"

This was addressed to Rosalind, and a fearful tremor shook her frame as she heard it, for its import was at once apparent.

"Do you suspect—" She had started forward and grasped the monk's arm, as she thus commenced, but she could not continue. The thought she would have uttered was terrible.

"Go on," whispered Valdimir, bending his head low down so as to catch her very thoughts if they left her lips. "What would you say?"

"Oh! I ought not—and yet I know his soul is capable even of that."

Thus much the fair countess murmured to herself; and then she gazed up and spoke to the strange man before her:

"Do you suspect my guardian?"

"Do *you* suspect him?" the monk returned.

"Oh, I know not what to think."

"But listen," resumed Vladimir, earnestly. "I would know all that you know, and then perhaps I can assist you. I mean to save Ruric, if I can; and if I can but gain a clew to him now, I can surely save you both. I possess a wondrous power for the good of those who

trust me. Now, what end could the duke have in view in wishing for Ruric's removal?"

In spite of all doubts Rosalind found herself trusting the monk. There was an air of conscious truth and power in his look and tone that won upon her.

"Good father," she returned, after a few moments' thought, "the duke has sworn by a most fearful oath that he will have me for his wife!"

"Ha!" cried the monk, starting back a pace and clenching his hands, does he mean that?"

"Oh, most truly he does," the young countess replied; and she spoke more firmly now, for there was something in the sudden energy of the monk's exclamation that gave her hope.

"Then he wants your estates, too. He is aiming for wealth with a high hand. And do you suppose he fears Ruric Nevel in connection with this scheme?"

"Yes, father—I will speak plainly, for I trust you. He knows that I love Ruric, and he knows, too, that Ruric loves me. May he not, under such circumstances, fear that the noble youth will try to thwart him?"

"Very likely," returned Vladimir, thoughtfully. "I will profit by this, and I am much mistaken if you do not also profit by it. I have those in Moscow who will work for me. I cannot, of course, directly assure you of salvation, for Ruric may never be found!"

A quick groan escaped from Claudia's lips as the monk thus spoke; but before Rosalind could speak the door of the apartment was opened and the Duke of Tula strode in! He stopped as he came nigh to where the company stood, and his eyes flashed and his frame trembled with passion.

"How now?" he cried, as soon as he could command speech. "What means this gathering here in my own palace? Meddling monk, how dare you drag your detestable form hither? Out, reptile! Out! And let me catch you here again and my dogs shall tear you up as they do carrion!"

Without a word the monk turned away. His face was pale as death, and his hands were clenched till the fingers' ends seemed to settle themselves into the palms.

"Remember," the duke exclaimed, as Valdimir reached the door, "if you dare to cross my doorstep again—"

"Hold!" gasped the monk, in a hoarse, startling tone. "Offer no more threats. But mark me, proud Duke. You shall see the day on which you'll wish God had made you a dog ere he gave you speech to arouse the just vengeance of Vladimir!"

And thus speaking the black monk disappeared.

"And you, woman—who art thou?" Olga exclaimed, turning an angry look upon Claudia.

"I am a mourning mother in search of her lost son," the woman sadly replied.

"Ha! I see the likeness now. You are the woman Nevel—mother of the young villain who bears that name! Leave my place at once, and don't you dare to enter it again!"

The poor woman tried to speak, but she could not. With a deep sob she turned away, and slowly walked from the room.

"Now," resumed the duke, turning towards Rosalind, "what means this sacred council?"

"My lord," returned the countess, struggling hard to

overcome her powerful emotions, "they were here to—to—"

But she could not finish the sentence. Her soul was too deeply moved. She only gave the foul wretch one look of horror and disgust, and then covering her face with her hands, she sobbed aloud.

If the bad man had anything further to say, he reserved it for some future time.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PLOTTER IS AT WORK.

The Count Conrad Damonoff was able to sit up. He was in a great stuffed chair, playing with a favorite dog, while near by him sat Stephen Urzen. The young nobleman had gained rapidly since the visit of Ruric, for the antidotes he had taken had proved efficient, and he soon came back to the point he had reached before the administering of the poison.

"Stephen," he said, pushing his dog gently from him, "has anything been heard yet from Ruric Nevel?"

"Not that I know of," returned Urzen.

"I wish I were able to assist in the search. But have you heard anything of what suspicions may be afloat?"

"Only that the hump-backed priest is looked upon by some as having had some hand in it."

Urzen did not know the secret of his friend's strange relapse, for that had been kept private; so he had no clew to the priest's true character such as the count possessed.

"I believe the fellow is a villain," Urzen resumed. "He is surely a villainous-looking man."

"So he is," responded the count.

"I never saw such a wicked look before in any human face."

"Ah," uttered a voice close by the door, "who comes in for the flattering remark, my friend?"

Both the count and Stephen turned, and the hump-backed priest stood in their presence.

"Ha!" he uttered, as he noticed the position of the invalid. "Up? So you are recovering?"

"Aye," returned Conrad, "I am gaining fast now, as you may see."

The priest struggled hard with his feelings, and at length he managed to conceal the deep disappointment he felt. That is, he hid it from Stephen's eyes, but the count knew him too well.

"You have not been very punctual of late, father," the latter said, also trying to conceal his real feelings.

"No, no," returned Savotano, in a perplexed manner, "I admit it; but, the fact is, I have been called away. Let's see—I have not been here since the evening on which I found a stranger sitting by your side while you were asleep."

"Who was the stranger?"

"I don't know. I think I never saw him before. He was a good looking young man. Perhaps he was some relative of yours."

This downright falsehood—so bold and flagrant—astonished even the count, for he knew the conversation which the priest had held with Ruric on that occasion.

"I thought you knew that man," the count said, looking the priest sharply in the face.

"No. I may have seen him before, but I did not surely recognize him then. And now, how happened this sudden change in your disease, my son? The doctors thought you were dying when I was here last."

"Yea—I know," answered the count, still hiding the deep disgust that moved within him; "but a new physician was called in, and he prescribed a new medicine. He said the medicine I had been taking was unsuited to my case, and so he gave me new. You can see the result."

"Yes—I see," was the reply; "and as you seem to have very good company I'll take my leave. I have several calls to make before night."

The count made no reply to this, and as the priest found that he was not urged to remain he arose at once. He stopped twice before he reached the door, but in neither case did he speak. As soon as he gained the street he turned towards the upper part of the city, and he stopped not until he had reached the palace of the Duke of Tula. The old porter admitted him without question, and he made his way at once to the hall, where he inquired for the duke. One of the servants went in search of his master, and when he returned he bade the priest follow.

The duke was in his private room, and as soon as the servant had withdrawn he bade his visitor take a seat.

"Now, Savotano, how is it?" he asked; "have you seen the count?"

"Aye—I am from there now. By all that's bad, my lord, the villain is gaining."

"Gaining?" repeated Olga, with surprise. "But you assured me he was well nigh gone."

"So he was—so he was. But he is recovering now."

"But how is it?"

"Why—he tells me he had a new physician, and that

the old medicine is all condemned, and an entire new course prescribed."

"And under this new treatment he is recovering, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, have you not taken some measures to fix this new medicine? Savotano, you must not let him slip now."

"Ah, my lord, I have only told you how *he* explained the matter. *I* have another explanation."

"What is it, sir priest."

"Why—they simply know that some one has attempted to poison the count."

"Ha! Did they say anything?"

"No—there was no need. I know that the medicine he was taking before was the right kind of medicine, so far as it came from the hands of the surgeon. And then there is another thing: The count must have had some powerful antidote on purpose for the poison."

"How do you know that?"

"Simply because he would not have now been alive had not such been the case. You may be sure, my lord, that they know poison has been administered. They have discovered it in some way, and taken the most effective and speedy method to overcome it. I know this."

"And do you think they suspect you?" the duke asked with some show of uneasiness.

"I don't know, but I fear they do. However, that amounts to nothing—only to prevent me from working any farther at present in the same direction. I have not laid myself open to detection in any way. 'Tis too

bad! In four-and-twenty hours more he would have been a dead man."

"Then you know when the discovery was made?"

"Yes—on the afternoon before Ruric Nevel was captured. I was there just before night, and the gunmaker was then there, and I noticed that the phials were gone from the table, though I gave no signs then of having noticed it. They had even then commenced some treatment for his cure, for I could see that the appearance of his skin had changed. You must not blame me."

"I do not, Savotano. But there may be some way left yet."

"O, yes—there are hundred ways in which we can dispose of him. But I may find some way yet before he gets out."

"Look you," the duke said, after a short pondering over his own thoughts, "you must watch every chance. Something may turn up in our favor. You may find some opportunity to finish him yet. I wish you could."

"I will do all I can, be sure of that. I shall watch narrowly. And now about the other one. Young Nevel is safe, and can be disposed of at any moment. I have let him live thus far because I had no orders otherwise."

"Ay—that was right," replied Olga; and as he did so he arose and commenced to pace the room. The priest followed him with his eyes, but said nothing. At length the duke stopped and looked Savotano in the face.

"It would not be a difficult case to kill him?" he uttered, in a low whisper.

"Not at all. Nothing could be more easy."

"And could detection ensue?"

"In no possible way."

"Then—"

"Listen," spoke the hump-back, as Olga hesitated. "I strongly suspect that 'twas this same gunmaker that led to the investigation of that medicine; and if it was he, then you will be more quickly suspected than I shall."

"Ha! Why think you so?"

"Because he is a fellow of wondrous wit and intelligence, and can see without being told: He has had several conferences here, and it was from here that he went direct to the count's residence. He knows by this time why the duel was hatched up, and if he has half the mind I give him credit for he will know that you are at the bottom of the poisoning business. I am sure of this."

"You are right, Savotano. Let him die!"

"I had thought myself that that would be the best way; for if he were at large you would not be safe."

"You can have him killed without noise or disturbance?"

"I think so," replied the priest, with a wicked smile. "At all events, his noise would not hurt any one, for he is rather too far away from the world to make himself heard."

"Where is he?"

"Why, where you recommended: In the furthest

vault beneath your old bathing-house; and that is a place where he cannot be readily found."

"And what disposition can you make of the body after the work is done?"

"Why—that is simple. It can be hidden in the old conduit. You know the conduit still exists there, and probably in some places between there and the river it is perfect; but near the building it is all in ruins. The body can be hidden so far in that no stench can come from it in summer time even to those in the vault itself. So you see that is easy."

"Then let the work be done to-night."

"To-morrow night, my lord, will do as well, for I am engaged to-night."

"Very well—let it be to-morrow. But mind—this is settled. There is no more question about this affair. When I see you again I trust you will have no reason to offer why Ruric Nevel has not been disposed of."

"You need have no fears on that head, my lord. You may consider that the gunmaker is dead."

"Right! So let it be."

And thus did the stout duke dispose of Ruric Nevel!

Again Olga took a turn across the room, and when he stopped there was a dark cloud upon his brow.

"Savotano," he said, "there is one more man whom I at least would be assured is not *in* my way. I mean that infernal monk."

"I saw him this morning, my lord, and I am sure he is watching me. And he is not alone. He has others with him. I have been followed, and one of my men—the one who entrapped Nevel—told me, not two hours ago, that he knew his steps had been followed."

"And do you think this monk is at the bottom of it?" asked the duke, with some uneasiness.

"I know it, for I have seen him when I knew he was watching me."

"Then why have you not got him out of the way?"

"Aha," uttered the priest, with a dubious shake of the head, "we cannot always do as we would. But he shall not live long—if I can help him off; and I think the opportunity may offer itself."

"He is a bold fellow. Why—I found him only yesterday—in my own palace—in the chamber of the countess."

"Indeed! And you could not have disposed of him then?"

"Not well. It was in broad day, and people were about. But if I find him there again my sword shall find his heart. I have given him legal warning. But," continued the duke, after some further thought, "you must be careful in your dealings with him. He may have some organized band always about him."

"I will be caught in no trap," returned the priest, confidently. "He shall find that I can be as keen as he can. But it is very strange—"

"What is strange?" asked Olga, starting, for he, too, had been thinking of a very strange thing.

"Why—that this black monk should turn up here in Moscow so suddenly, and commence, the first thing, to dog my footsteps, and hang about your palace."

"Aye," responded Olga. "And the same thought was in my mind when you spoke. But never mind—he shall not escape me if he presumes much more. They shall know that the Duke of Tula is not to be trifled

with. There is but one power in Moscow above mine, and that is the emperor himself; and I may say that even he is not above me. He cannot get along without me. Does anything turn up to puzzle him he sends straightway for me."

"Then use your power for your own good, my lord."

"I will. Fear not for me on that score."

At this juncture the priest arose to take his leave.

"You have your instructions," said Olga.

"I remember them well, my lord—and they shall be carried out to the letter."

"And when done, let me know."

"I will obey."

And once more the misshapen priest was in the street, and the duke was alone.

"Ah, my lord," muttered the pliant tool to himself, as he walked thoughtfully along, "you may be a little too confident of your own power. I have known such things in Russia!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MYSTIC TRIBUNAL.

Away back of the old cathedral of Moscow, and in a narrow, dark court which was overlooked by the towers of the giant edifice, stood a curiously constructed stone building, which, though not connected bodily with the cathedral, yet seemed to belong to it. It was low and broad, with a flat, tiled roof, and without a visible window. Within one of the apartments of this building—an apartment away down in the bowels of the earth, where the light of day never came—were seated six men. The room was of fair size, and the floor, the walls and the ceiling were of dark stone. Wooden benches were arranged about the place; and there were some other articles of furniture there, too—strange contrivances they were, and fashioned after various shapes and patterns. But of that anon. The place was lighted by a large hanging lamp, which had just power enough to make the room gloomy and dismal. The six men sat about a table, on which were a book and sword, and the most prominent man there was Vladimir the Monk!

And Vladimir alone exposed his face. All the rest wore black masks, their robes being of the same melancholy hue. They sat there silent as death, Vladimir gazing down upon the table, and the other five gazing fixedly upon him. They were stout men, all of them,

and they bore themselves toward Vladimir as bears a servant to his acknowledged master.

"The hour is waxing late," said Vladimir, at length looking up from the table. His voice sounded in that place like the echo of a tomb. It was low and hollow, and the others started as they heard it.

"There's time yet to spare, master," replied one who sat next the monk.

"I trust we shall not be disappointed," said Vladimir, at the expiration of a few moments more.

To this no answer was returned.

At length there came a dull echo from overhead, and the six dark sitters started up to listen. The sound grew louder, and soon it sent down into that dismal chamber the notes of coming footsteps. In a few moments more the heavy iron door creaked upon its hinges, and three men entered, and soon behind them came three more. Those who came in advance were two of them leading the third as a prisoner. And so it was with those behind. The iron door creaked again, and when the heavy bolts had been shoved into their sockets, the two prisoners were led forward.

"Master," spoke one of the new-comers, "we have brought the prisoners—two of them—as you commanded."

"It is well," said Vladimir. "Let them be brought before us."

As the two men are brought where the light can strike upon their faces we see the two guides who conducted Ruric Nevel to his place of confinement. One of them was he who met Ruric in the street, and the other is the one who guided him into the old bath-house with

the lantern in his hand. They shuddered fearfully as they gazed around upon the dismal scene, and their looks plainly showed that they knew not why they had been brought thither.

“*Lesko Totma !*” pronounced Vladimir.

The first of the prisoners—he who had met Ruric in the street—started as he heard that name, and tried to speak.

“Are you the man?” asked the monk, looking into his face.

“Yes, holy father,” the wretch tremblingly replied.

“Then stand you here in front of me.”

The fellow was moved up in front of the table, and surprise and fear seemed to be struggling for the mastery over him, for he recognized now the strange monk about whom he had probably heard so much.

“*Lesko Totma*,” said Vladimir, lowly and slowly, “you have been seen much in the company of a hump-backed priest named Savotano. You know such a priest, do you not?”

The man hesitated. He gazed furtively about him, and trembled more than before.

“Answer me!”

“Yes, sir—I know him.”

“And now, sir, be sure that you answer me directly and truly. Do you know a young gunmaker named Ruric Nevel?”

The fellow started with a perceptible quake as this question was asked, but he seemed to have been prepared for it, for his answer was direct.

“No, sir—I do not.”

“Ha—beware! Think well, before you speak.”

"If you mean the man who fought the duel with the Count Damonoff, then I have heard of him; but I do not know that I ever saw him."

"You are sure of this?"

"Of course I am."

"*Frederick Viska!*"

The second prisoner now came forward. He was a few years younger than his companion, though somewhat larger, and evidently more bold. Totma was conducted out of the apartment as Viska came forward.

"You, too, have been in the company of this priest, Savotano, have you not?" the monk asked.

"I know him," Viska replied, with a slight touch of defiance in his tone. He had not surely looked about him to see those strange contrivances by which he was surrounded, or he would not have ventured such a tone.

"And you have been some in his company?"

"Perhaps so."

"Very well. And now do you not also know Ruric Nevel?"

"I have seen him, too, sir."

"And now—can you tell me where he is at this present time?"

"No," was the answer, short and quick.

"Beware! If you have any regard for your own welfare you will answer me truly. Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I tell you I know nothing about him—nothing at all."

"And of this you are sure?"

"Who are you that assume to question me thus? I know you not."

Viska spoke this in a tone of virtuous indignation, probably thinking that that turn might serve him.

"We will let you into the secret by and by," the monk returned, with a peculiar shake of the head. "But I will ask you once more: Do you know where Nevel is?"

"*No!*"

"You need not speak quite so loud. We hear easily."

"Then don't ask me impertinent questions," retorted the prisoner.

Vladimir started half way up, and his fists were clenched; but the quick flush passed from his face, and he sat back again.

"Look you," he said, as soon as he was sure his anger would not manifest itself, "were I not sure that you know what I ask, I would not question you thus. And now, once more, I ask you—will you give me some clew to the whereabouts of Ruric Nevel?"

"I'll answer you once more. I know nothing about him. You must not think that this dark place, and you men all dressed in black, can frighten me into telling a lie, as it would a child."

At this point Vladimir turned to one of his men—one of those who helped bring the prisoners in—and said:

"You know this to be the man?"

"Yes, my master."

"And you have seen him in private confab with the hump-backed priest?"

"I have."

"And the other things you told me are true?"

"They are, master."

"Then let down those *interpreters*."

At this command two of the attendants moved to the back side of the room, where they unhooked a stout chain from the wall, and as they allowed it to slide through their hands, a curious piece of machinery descended directly in front of the table. It consisted of a stout bar of iron, which was suspended midway upon the chain, and there rested parallel with the ceiling. Upon each end of this bar were straps of iron, armed with springs and screws. At a motion from the monk the prisoner was led back till he stood directly beneath the bar, and then his arms were seized and raised up. He struggled some, and cursed more, but he was soon overcome. The iron bands were passed around his wrists, and connected with these were two small cups which were slipped over the thumbs. After these had been firmly secured the chain was tightened, and the man's hands were raised far above his head. There were two results produced by tightening the chain: It not only tended to draw the thumbs back upon the wrists, but it also twisted the thumb, the two cups being armed with file-like teeth within, and closing tightly upon the flesh.

"Now, sir," spoke Vladimir, lowly and deeply, "I am going to ask those questions again, and you will do well to answer them truly. Will you tell me where Ruric Nevel is?"

"I don't know."

"Will you tell me where you saw him last?"

"I haven't seen him since he fought the duel with Damonoff."

"Beware!"

"I have not."

"Mark me: I have had you watched, and I know that you have seen Nevel within these three days. This I *know*, so I have no hesitation in the course I am about to pursue. Once more—where is Ruric Nevel?"

The man hesitated now; but his answer was still the same. He would not tell.

Vladimir made a motion to the two men who stood by the wall, and they gave a pull upon the chain.

"Oh! oh!" gasped the prisoner, as the painful twist and wrench came upon his thumbs.

"Will you answer?"

"How can I? How can I?"

"By speaking what you know."

"I know nothing."

Another signal was made to the men at the chain, and they pulled again. Another groan from the prisoner, but no response.

Another signal—and another pull.

"Mercy!" shrieked the poor wretch, quivering with pain.

"Will you answer?"

"I don't know."

"Then we must try again."

"No, no. Oh, no more!"

"But you must answer."

"I don't know."

"Then you must have forgotten, and such treacherous memories need starting up."

As Vladimir thus spoke he waved his hand again.

“ Oh, God have mercy! Oh-o-o! Save me! Save me!”

“ Save yourself.”

The wretch was in torment now without ceasing. Nearly the whole of his weight bore upon his wrists and thumbs, and the latter were drawn over almost to the wrist. But he would not answer. He had a deeper fear than this. He feared to break the horrid oaths by which he was bound to the scheming priest.

One more pull upon the chain and the man's feet were clear of the floor. His whole weight now bore wrenchingly upon his thumbs, and he groaned in the agony of torture. He bore it a few moments, but his coward soul could bear no more.

“ Oh, mercy! Down! down! Let me down!”

“ But answer. Where is Ruric Nevel?”

“ I—I—don't—”

“ Hold, thou false-hearted villain!” shouted Vladimir, in a voice of thunder. “ This is the last of this torture; but when we take you from here we can put you into a state compared with which the pain you now experience is real joy! Each particular limb shall be wrenched out of shape, and your very eyes shall start out like—”

“ Down! down! Oh, have mercy! down!”

“ *Where is Ruric Nevel?*”

“ I'll tell you—I'll tell you if you spare me!”

“ Tell me first!”

There was a moment more of hesitation—one single moment—and then the miserable wretch gave up.

“ He's in the old bath-house.”

“ Ha! Where?”

“ In the old bath, near the river—on the Tula pass—in one of the vaults ! ”

“ Very well. Let him down.”

The chain was slacked up, and Frederick Viska was once more upon his feet. He trembled yet, for there was pain in his arms.

“ Now carry him out,” ordered Vladimir, “ and bring the other one in.”

In a few moments more Lesko Totma was before the strange tribunal. He trembled fearfully, for he had been where he could hear his companion’s groans without hearing what he said.

“ Lesko Totma,” spoke the monk, in a low, deep tone, “ we have given you time for thought, and mayhap you have your memory brightened by this time. Now, where is Ruric Nevel ? ”

“ I don’t know.”

“ Ah, you still forget, eh ? ”

“ I never knew.”

“ A most strange forgetfulness, I must confess. Let the *interpreters* be adjusted ! ”

“ Oh, mercy ! Don’t murder me ! ”

But no notice was taken of his cries. The straps and conical cups were adjusted, and the chain drawn tight. At the first turn of the self-acting screw the fellow shrieked. It was not so much with present pain as with the fear of what was to come. The very presage of the place, so dark and dismal, had more effect upon his mind than it had upon his companion’s.

At a second pull of the chain he groaned and begged for mercy. He had heard of this dark place, and he

fancied that men who came there seldom went away alive.

"Hark you, you base wretch," the monk said, "if you do not tell me where the young gunmaker is I'll have you torn limb from limb! another pull, there!"

As the wretch came again the villain fairly shouted with pain.

"Oh! let me go! let me go! I'll tell all!"

"Then tell. You leave not this place alive until you have told!"

"He is—Oh! he is—in the old bath!"

"Where?"

"The duke's bath—on the pass of Tula!"

"Whereabouts there?"

"In the lowest, furthest vault. Oh! Spare!"

Vladimir waved his hand, and the quaking wretch was freed from his torture.

"Now conduct them both to the dungeons, and lock them up. They must not run at large for the present. Let them be secure."

"No, no," cried Viska, who had been brought back, "You were to let me go if I told you."

"Not free, sir," said Vladimir.

"But you have no right to hold me thus. I am nearly dead with pain now where you have torn my hands in pieces. By the—"

"Silence, dog! My authority here is my power. My right is my might. I have you, and I will keep you. Were I to let you go I might not have the power to catch you again, as legal officers could. Lead them off, and then we'll turn our attention to the duke's bath!"

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE DUKE'S BATH.

Ruric Nevel could keep no account of time. Darkness, and darkness only, dwelt with him in his prison house—darkness so utter that the only effect of opening the eyes was the nervous reality of the motion. In fact, 'twas lighter with the eyes closed than with them opened, for when tightly closed there were peculiar fantastic shapes floating in the imagination, and even this was a relief; and then there was a sort of kaleidoscopic succession of colors when the lids were tightly pressed that seemed grateful to the nerves, and gave variety to the mind. But when the eyes were open only a cold impenetrable blackness was present, within which there were no shapes, no forms, save the one form of utter chaos.

Ruric felt sure he had been there four days, and at times it appeared longer than that. Food and drink had been brought to him thrice, and he was now without both. His strength had not yet left him, though there were pains in his limbs, and a chilling sensation about the heart. He had broken the rope from his arms on the first day of his confinement; and he had hoped to overcome the man who brought him food and drink, and thus make his escape; but no human being had yet come in to him. His food had been passed through a small wicket.

“And this is the end of life!” he murmured to himself, as he paced slowly to and fro across the dungeon. “Thus end all the hopes of youth, and here the prayers of a lifetime must close in one last hope—one hope of Heaven when earth has passed away! My mother, no farewell can reach thee from the lips of thy son. He will lie down in the dark slumber of death, and thou shalt not know his resting-place! And, thou loved one—Oh! thou fondly-cherished, wildly-worshiped being, thy smiles can shine no more for me. Oh! Rosalind, would that I could see thee but once—that once more I might press thee to my bosom, and bid thee remember me when I am gone. Had I never seen thee I might not be here now! And yet, O God, for life itself I would not wipe away the written story of that holy love from my heart!”

The thought of Rosalind came heavily upon him. All else he could give up in a higher hope than that of earth; but for her he held a strange fear. She would be another’s.

“And must it be so?” he continued, after some minutes of painful reflection. “Alas! she will be nothing to me hereafter! My mother will know her son, but Rosalind will know another! And yet—she may carry the old love with her always. She may never forget it. Oh! could I but once—”

He stopped suddenly, for he heard a footfall in the low passage close by the dungeon. He listened, and he heard more. There were several feet—and soon he heard voices. He moved back to the extremity of the vault and listened. The feet stopped, and the sound of grating iron, like the drawing of a bolt, was heard.

Soon afterwards the door was opened, and the light from a lantern flashed into the place. For a few moments the prisoner was blinded by the sudden transition, but by degrees he overcame the difficulty, and was able to look up.

The first object upon which his eyes fell was the hump-backed priest, Savotano. There were four others behind him, but Ruric noticed them not yet. He saw before him the man whom he believed to be the instrument of his suffering, and with one bound he reached him and felled him to the floor.

"Hold!" cried one of the others—one who held the lantern—"we have come to conduct thee out from here."

"Ha!—say you so?"

"Most surely we have."

"Then stand aside and let me go."

"Just as you say. The doors are open and you may go. You may follow us, or you may go in advance."

"Then lead on," returned Ruric, "and I will follow."

"As you say."

Thus speaking the man assisted the priest to his feet, and led him out from the cell. In a few moments more the others went out also, and Ruric prepared to follow. He heard the priest cursing, but he noticed that one of the others led him off. The youth stepped forth into the passage, but he did not place the fullest confidence in what he had heard. He reached the foot of the stairs, and the others were nearly up. He started to follow them, and had nearly gained the top, when a quick, lightning-like shadow flitted before him. He would have started back but 'twas too late. There

came a blow upon his head, and with a dull, crashing sensation he sank down. He realized that he was turned over, and that a rope was being lashed about his arms.

But the prisoner had not been fully stunned. He returned to consciousness as they lifted him to his feet, and his first impulse was to try and force his bonds asunder, but this he could not do. He gazed up now, and he found only two men with him, and they wore masks upon their faces. They were stout, powerful men, and their very bearing was murderous, and his heart sank within him.

"Come," said one of them. "You'll go with us. We won't force you if you'll walk."

"But where?" asked the youth. "What mean you?"

"You'll see when you get there. But there's no time to waste; so come."

What could the prisoner do? His hands were firmly bound behind him, and his great strength availed him not a bit. He knew that he could not resist, so he simply bowed his head in token of submission, and prepared to follow his conductors. But they left him not to follow at will. They took him by either arm, and thus led him away. He remembered the room into which he had been first conducted on the evening of his capture, but he was not detained there. From here a long corridor led off to where a wing of the building had been partly torn away, and they soon came to a large circular apartment, in the centre of which was a deep basin, where, in years gone by, people had been wont to bathe. The walls looked grim and ragged by the feeble rays of the lantern, and the chill wind came

moaning through the cracks and crevices in the decaying masonry.

"There," spoke one of the guides, as he set his lantern upon the top of a broken column, "we will stop here."

The words were spoken in a sort of hushed, unmerciful tone, and Ruric felt them strike fearfully upon him. He gazed upon the man who had spoken, and he saw that he was preparing to throw off his pelisse, which he had thus far worn. As soon as this was off, he moved to where his companion stood and commenced to whisper.

Could Ruric mistake longer? What reason, but *one*, could there have been for bringing him to such a place? To the left, where the basin had once emptied itself, there was a dark, deep cave-like place, at the mouth of which a heap of rubbish had collected. What a place in which to hide a dead body! So thought Ruric. But he was startled from the dark reverie by a darker reality.

One of the men had taken a club—a long, heavy bludgeon which the youth had not before seen—and was just balancing it in one hand while he spit upon the other.

"You will not murder me here in cold blood!" cried Ruric starting back.

The stout ruffian clutched his club in both hands, but made no verbal answer.

"Speak! Answer me!" the prisoner exclaimed, starting back another pace. "Do you mean to murder me?"

"Why," answered the man with the club, in a cool,

off-hand manner, "since you are so anxious to know I'll tell you. You will die within a minute!"

"And will you take the life of one who never harmed you? Hold! If money be your object—"

"Stop," interrupted the villain. "You can't argue us out of it in that way. You've got to die, and the sooner you go the sooner you'll get over it. You won't suffer a bit if you don't go to kick up a fuss. There, now—if you hadn't bothered me 'twould have been all over by this time."

What would not Ruric have given at that moment for the use of one of his arms! But that was beyond praying for. Yet he had his feet. He said nothing more, but he allowed the man to come within a few yards of him, and then he prepared for the only means of defence he had. The huge club was raised, and at that moment Ruric saw that the other man also had a club. He knew then that they had been concealed there until now.

"Hark!" uttered the second villain, just as his companion had raised his club. "What noise is that?"

"I suppose they're coming to see if we've finished the job," returned the other, "and we ought to have done it ere this. But they shall find it done?"

The ponderous club was raised again, and with a quick, decisive movement the man advanced. Ruric made a movement of the body as though he would bow his head for the stroke. Every nerve and muscle of his frame was set for the trial, and for the instant his heart stood still. Quick as thought his body bent—his light knee was brought almost to his chin—and then, with all the force he could command, he planted his foot in the

pit of the assassin's stomach. The effect was electrical. The wretch bent like a broken stick, and sank down without a single sign of life.

The second man uttered an oath, and sprang forward with uplifted club, but Ruric easily dodged the blow, and then, as the thought for the first time flashed upon his mind, he darted to where the lantern stood, and overturned it. He had noticed an open passage close at hand, which seemed to lead to some sort of a dressing-room, and, guided by his memory alone, for it was now dark as Erebus there, he glided swiftly into it. When he knocked over the lantern he had upset column and all, and just as he reached the passage he heard a heavy fall, and he knew that his enemy had stumbled over the fallen column. He heard the curses, loud and deep, which dropped from the lips of the baffled man as he picked himself up, and in a moment more he was edified by conversation between the two: for villain number one had revived, though the tone of his voice plainly indicated that he had a severe pain still lingering with him.

"Michael! Michael!" groaned number one; and as he spoke Ruric could hear him scrambling upon his feet.

"Hi, Orel," returned number two.

"Have you dropped him?"

"No!" cried Michael with a curse, which we do not choose to transcribe. "He's a perfect devil!"

"But where's the lantern?"

"He put it out."

"But you ought to have knocked him down, you clown."

"So had you."

"Me? Why, he kicked me over."

"Well, he dodged by me, and kicked over the lantern."

"But where is he now?"

"He's gone. Hark! Ha! I guess they've caught him. Don't you hear?"

"Yes; they've caught somebody."

"And of course it's him. He went that way. Let's go and find—"

He did not finish the sentence, for at that moment a voice came up in thunder tones, and it said:

"RURIC! RURIC!"

"What is that?" gasped villain number one.

"RURIC! RURIC!"

"That is not from any of our men!" cried the second villain. "Ha! they are coming this way!"

"RURIC! RURIC!"

"Where shall we flee?" cried Michael.

"There is but one place," returned Orel. "Here, in the little dressing-room. Come—let's find it. Oh! curses on that gunmaker's head! If he be not the very devil, then he is a bound partner of his. Have you found the entrance, Michael?"

"No. It is near you somewhere. Can't you—Ha! In! in!"

At that moment the flare of a flaming torch flashed through the gloom of the place, and the two villains stood revealed. A dozen stout men, all well armed, appeared in the only passage by which they could make escape, for to have fled into the dressing-room of which they had spoken would avail them nothing.

"Ho, villains!" shouted Vladimir the monk, raising his flaming torch high above his head with his left hand, while with his right he waved a heavy sword; "where is Ruric Nevel?"

"Here! here!" cried our hero, starting forward into the larger room.

"What! safe? — alive? — well?" Vladimir fairly shouted.

"Aye—my noblest friends. But cast off this accursed bond from my arms. It eats into the flesh."

The rope was quickly taken off, and then the youth embraced his deliverer. No questions were asked there. Only a few sincere thanks were uttered, and then attention was turned to the two villains who yet stood trembling near them. They had not attempted an escape, for the way was blocked up. They were quickly secured, and then the party turned away from the place; and as they went Ruric gave the monk an account of the manner in which he had been entrapped, and of the events which had transpired since.

"Merciful Heavens!" ejaculated Vladimir, as Ruric closed his account of the manner in which he had overcome the two men who had thought to murder him. "It was a narrow escape."

"But I might not have escaped without your coming," the youth said, "for they would surely have found me. With my hands lashed behind me, as they were, I could not have escaped."

"True—true," returned Vladimir, thoughtfully. "It was a narrow chance. But it is over now."

"And how gained you the knowledge of my whereabouts?" asked Ruric.

"I'll explain it to you when we have time. But did I understand you to say the hump-backed priest was here?"

"He came to my dungeon with the rest, and 'twas he that I knocked down. Have you not found him?"

"No—we have seen nothing of him. We found two men in the hall, that was all."

The place was searched all through for the priest, but he could not be found, and when Vladimir was assured that the arch villain had made his escape he prepared to leave the building. The prisoners—four of them—were led out first, and taken away by the monk's followers.

When Ruric reached the street the stars were all out, and the cool, frosty air struck gratefully upon his brow. He turned toward his mysterious companion, and under the grateful impulse of the moment he stopped. He raised his hands toward heaven—uttered one fervent sentence of thanksgiving to God—and then moved on again.

CHAPTER XVI.

THWARTED, BUT NOT SUBDUED.

It was long after midnight, and yet the widow Nevel had not sought her bed. She was now pacing to and fro across her kitchen, and the boy Paul sat nodding in his chair. Suddenly the woman stopped, and Paul started up.

"Do you think that message was a false one?" she asked, looking the boy in the face.

"I don't know," he returned. "If he came from the black monk, as he said he did, then I think he spoke the truth."

"Oh! They would not have deceived me."

"No, my mistress, I am sure they would not."

"But it is very late."

"Hark!—There are bells."

The widow heard them, and with a wildly fluttering heart she sank into a chair.

"They have stopped in front of the house," said Paul whose head was bent in a listening attitude.

"Go—go—open—"

Paul started. The widow heard the door opened, and she heard voices in the hall. In a moment the inner door was opened, and she looked up. She saw a manly form—she heard the magic word—*Mother*—trembling upon the air. With one low cry of joy she

started to her feet, and on the next moment she was clasped to the bosom of her son.

"Did I not say I'd bring him back to you?" cried Vladimir, rubbing his hands with joy.

"Oh! God bless you, sir!" the widow murmured, gazing through her tears into the monk's face.

"So, so," returned the strange man. "The blessing of an honest soul is reward enough for one night, so I'll take myself off for the present."

"No, no," cried Ruric. "You'll remain here till morning."

But the monk could not be prevailed upon so to do. He had business to attend to, and he could not stop; and he hurried away as quickly as possible to avoid the thanks that were showered upon him.

After Vladimir was gone, Ruric sat down and related to his mother all that had occurred since that day on which he left her to go and see the count. She trembled fearfully as he related the diabolical attempts that had been made upon him; and when he had concluded she sat for a few moments like one in a painful trance.

"And do you think," she said at length, while a cold shudder ran through her frame, "that the Duke of Tula was the cause of all this?"

"I am sure of it, my mother."

"Then you are not safe yet."

"But I shall see the emperor."

"I have seen him, my son."

"Ah—and what said he?"

"Why—he said if we could find out who had done you harm he would punish them. Then I asked him—suppose it was a duke? and he said in that case he

should have to look into the matter. Oh! I fear he would not dare to punish the powerful Olga."

"Perhaps not; but yet, my mother, I will give him credit for better things. Yet," the youth continued, in a sad tone, "there is one for whom I care more than self, and who is now within the wicked duke's power. Oh! she is his beyond any power of the emperor!"

"Not absolutely beyond his power, is she?" the mother asked.

"Why—of course Peter has the power to set aside any wardship, but 'twould not be policy for him to interfere in the domestic affairs of his powerful nobles. I feel sure that his heart would bid him interfere, but his judgment would oppose it. You have seen Rosalind?"

"Yes."

"And was she unhappy when she knew that I was missing?"

"Ah, Ruric, returned the mother, with a kindling eye, "you do not know how that noble girl loves you. Her heart was almost broken when she knew that evil had befallen you."

The widow had it in her mind to tell of the scene which had transpired upon the duke's coming into the maiden's presence when she was there, but she thought a second time ere she spoke, and then she concluded not to speak of it at present, for she knew 'twould only serve to give her son additional pain without bestowing any benefit.

"By heavens!" uttered Ruric, at the end of a troubled reverie, and at the same time clasping his hands vehemently together, "was ever man so surrounded by impenetrable mystery before? This monk

is surely a good man. He has served me well, and I am sure he would serve me more if opportunity offered. But who is he? Have you found out anything concerning him?"

"I have not, my son."

"But is it not strange?"

"It is."

And so they conversed until their drooping lids would no longer remain apart, and then, having first rendered up their thanks to God, and asked His help for the future, they retired to their respective places of rest. Ruric had strange dreams, and for the life of him he could not tell whether they were good or bad. Once he dreamed he was a duke himself, and that he had a wife whose face he had never seen. She would not raise her veil until the ceremony was performed. Then she removed the obstruction, and Ruric started on beholding the face of Vladimir the monk! And then Vladimir seemed to say: "All this I have done for thee. Do you like it?" And Ruric dared not object because Vladimir had done so much for him.

And now, while Ruric awakes from his dreams and wonders what they meant, let us look in and see what is going on in the ducal palace.

It was early morning, and the Duke of Tula was once more in his own private apartment. He had not slept well, for he, too, had had dreams, and they were troublesome ones. They hung about him even now, and they filled his mind with dark and gloomy forebodings. He paced to and fro across the apartment, sometimes stopping and bowing his head, and then starting on again with new clouds upon his brow. Thus he walked and

pondered until he was aroused by a stealthy footfall close to the door. He stopped and listened. He knew the step. 'Twas the one he had been waiting for. He moved to the door and opened it, and the hump-backed priest, Savotano, entered the apartment.

"Ah, Savotano, I feared you would never come," said the duke, as his workman closed the door behind him.

"I would have come sooner if I could, my lord; but even now it is early morning. The sun is hardly above the city walls."

"Well—it is early, I know; but I have not slept well."

"I have not slept at all, my lord."

"No? Savatano, you look worn and weary. But you have been at work."

"Aye—I have."

"And you have come to tell me the result of that work. Does it move you so to do such work? I thought you were used to it?"

The priest gazed into his master's face, but he did not speak.

"Bah!" said Olga, contemptuously. "What is the killing of a man? But tell me—did you conceal the body so that no one will find it?"

It was some moments before Savotano spoke. His frame trembled, and his hands worked nervously together. But at length he said, in a hesitating tone:

"He is not dead, my lord."

"Not dead yet? But you promised me he should be."

"I know—but we could not do it."

"I gave you credit for more firmness. Not kill a man? What is there so terrible in it?"

"You misunderstood me, my lord. We did all we could towards killing him, but he escaped us."

"Hold!" cried the duke, starting forward and grasping the priest by the shoulder. "You do not mean that Ruric Nevel has escaped you?"

"He has, my lord."

"But not entirely? You do not mean that he has fairly gone from out your hands?"

"He has, my lord. But listen—"

"Listen, thou bungler! What story can you tell to make that smooth and reasonable? You had him in your power, and you should have kept him."

"But, my lord, Satan himself is working for that man. We went last night to kill the fellow, and I waited all of two hours for Totma and Viska, but the rascals did not come, and I engaged others."

"And did they prove treacherous?" cried Olga, in sudden passion.

"No, my lord—they did their best, but they were intercepted by that accursed black monk, who came backed by some dozen men."

"What! Do you mean that Vladimir came there?"

"Yes."

"And with a band of armed men?"

"Yes."

"Then, by the gods, there's treachery somewhere?"

"I know not what to think, my lord," returned Savotano, in an uneasy, perplexed tone. "The only men who are absent are Lesko Totma and Frederick Viska; and they are surely our best men."

"But you see plainly that there must have been treachery!" exclaimed the duke, passionately. "Oh! how I would like to know the man! And did this monk carry off the gunmaker?"

"He did. And he captured four of our men. I escaped without being seen."

"That is fortunate—"

"I mean that the monk did not see me—nor did any of his followers. But the gunmaker saw me."

"And do you think he mistrusted you had any hand in the matter of his imprisonment?"

"I should judge so," returned the priest, with a peculiar twinge of vengeance about the lips. "The villain knocked me down."

"Ha!"

"Aye—the moment he saw me."

"But do you think he *knows* anything about it?"

"No, I do not think he does. He can only suspect."

"Then we'll be prepared for him, if your own men are to be depended upon. But leave that to me. I'll fix that matter with the emperor. I'll see him this very day, and be sure he shall have a story that can destroy all evidence which these fellows can hatch up."

"But I must flee, my lord."

"Not yet, Savotano. I must have your help within a very short time. The Countess Rosalind Valдай shall be my wife within the present week. I'll place the seal of fact upon that matter at once. Fear not, for I know my influence over the emperor will shield you from all harm. Why, Peter would sooner lose his right arm than lose me."

"Then most surely I will remain, my lord, for I much wish to perform that ceremony for you. But who is this black monk?—this Vladimir?"

The duke started across the floor, and for some moments he continued pacing to and fro. When he stopped he brought his hands together with an energetic movement, and looking the priest sternly in the face, he said :

"Let that monk be who he may, I'll destroy him ! I have the power, and I'll use it. As warden of the city I have the power to arrest him upon suspicion of conspiracy. I'll do it. Where is he now ? "

"I know not."

"Never mind. I'll to the emperor first. I'll study my plan, and ere the sun sets it shall be carried out. I'll be baffled thus no more. I could have wished that this gunmaker had been quietly out of the way, for then all would have been clear and plain, and I should not have feared the trouble of his clamoring about my ears. But let him go. I would not give much for the life he has left. I'll dispose of him soon. But that monk—he dies at once, and without consultation with the emperor ; for I can swear he is a conspirator."

"Good!" ejaculated the priest.

And thus the business was arranged for the present. Passion helped the duke wondrously in his conclusions ; and the *wish* was made into the *power*. But even before the priest left the stout nobleman began to wish that he had a very little more power. In fact, as he came to reason he began to doubt ; but he gave up not one idea of the plan he had formed for the vengeance his soul so madly craved.

CHAPTER XVII.

TRANSACTIONS OF A NIGHT.

"I dare not! Oh, I dare not!"

"But it is your only hope."

"And whither shall we go?"

"Anywhere, rather than remain here. Oh! my mistress, if you stay here you know the fate which awaits you. There is no other means of escape from the wicked duke's power."

"And I must thus cast myself among strangers—lose my all of earth—"

"Hold, Rosalind. There is surely one in Moscow who will help you. Let us go to the emperor. Oh, if he be the man I have heard, he will surely listen."

"Ah, Zenobie, the duke is high in power, and his influence is great at court. Peter would not dare to thwart him."

"It may be so, but I do not believe it. And yet, my mistress, just think, for one moment, how you stand in that respect. You have nothing to lose. This life of earth, with all its pains and sorrows, and with its most exquisite tortures, holds nothing worse for you within the bounds of possibility than to become the duke's wife. If there were but one chance in the thousand, you had better try it. Remember—you cannot possibly lose anything, but the chances are for you. Let us go to the emperor."

"But how, Zenobie?"

"This evening — after the darkness of night has gathered over the city — let us go. I tell you I do not believe the emperor will deliberately suffer a great wrong to be done for the sake of pacifying the duke. He has more noble independence than that."

The young countess did not answer at once. She pressed her small white hand hard upon her brow, and thus she remained for some time buried in profound thought. At length she raised her head, and the fire of determination was in her eye.

"I will go," she said. "I will go to the emperor. He will help me if he has a human heart."

"You have one satisfaction, my mistress: he cannot harm you."

"Cannot?"

"I mean that you can but be made to marry with Olga; and all other harm would be as nothing compared with that."

"Aye, you are right, Zenobie. We will go this very night."

The more Rosalind pondered upon this new resolve the more hope did she derive from it. Ere long she conversed more freely with her attendant, and at times that old smile would struggle for a moment upon her face. Yet she had gloomy moments, too. Her fear was too deeply fixed to be swept away so easily.

The afternoon passed away, and as the shades of night gathered over the great city, the two girls were astir. Zenobie gathered together such articles of clothing as would be needed, and proceeded to prepare her mistress for the adventure.

"Fear not," she said, as she drew on Rosalind's robe of fur, "for there can be no danger worse than that we flee from. Try only to remember that you flee from the duke."

This served to nerve the fair young countess up to the task, and her frame ceased its trembling.

"I shall not falter now," she said. "But shall we find the emperor at this late hour?"

"Bless me, 'tis not late. But even if we do not see him to-night, we can do it in the morning. We shall find plenty in the imperial palace who will shelter us till then."

The girls were now ready, and all that remained was to start on their strange mission. With noiseless steps they left the apartment where they had dressed, and proceeded along the corridor to the great staircase. Zenobie knew there would be less danger there than to go down the other way among the servants. Having descended these stairs they came to the great hall, which opened one way into the salons. They took the former course, and were soon in the court. The only trouble now was in passing the porter's lodge at the gate, for they knew the great gate was not open, and to gain the street they must pass through the room where the porter always staid. Zenobie went ahead and looked in. The porter sat by the fire playing with his dog.

"My mistress," whispered the girl, as she came back, "old John is in the lodge, and we need have no fear. He is a simple, good-natured fellow, and I am sure I can get by him. Do you go in advance—cover up your

face—don't look at him; and be sure you don't tremble. Leave it all to me. Remember now: you have—”

“Fear not, Zenobie. Go on.”

So on they went, and when they reached the lodge Rosalind went in first and stood by the wicket, while Zenobie followed, and opened the door that looked into the porter's room.

“Good John,” she uttered, in anxious tones, “come and open the wicket for me quick. My good mistress is very ill, and Tilda and I are going for the doctor. Come—be quick.”

“But why don't some of the men go?” asked John, as he started up and forced his dog back.

“Because 'twould take them longer to do the errand than 'twill us. But don't detain us. We shan't be gone long.”

The honest porter had orders not to allow the countess to pass out, but he thought not of that now. He had known the gentle girl from a child, and so well did he love her that he might not have stopped her even had he known she was then waiting to pass out. At all events, he could not refuse the present request, so he came out and opened the wicket without further question, and the girls passed through.

“Now—now,” said Zenobie, in nervous haste, “we are clear of the palace. Here is the street. Our walk is not long.”

Rosalind answered not, but drawing her robe more closely about her to keep out the cold, biting wind, she hastened along by the side of her companion. Hope was now alive within her. She turned one glance behind her, and she could see the light which she had

left burning in her chamber. It seemed at that moment to be the fiery eye of a demon gazing after her, and instinctively she quickened her pace.

* * * * *

Twice during the day did the Duke of Tula call at the imperial palace without being able to find the emperor; but in the evening he was more fortunate. The emperor was in, and Olga was admitted at once to his presence.

"Well, my lord duke," said Peter, as Olga approached, "what business calls you from home at this hour?"

"Business of importance, sire. Business of less moment to me than to the state."

"Ah! Proceed."

Only two attendants were with the emperor, one of whom was Demetrius the Greek, and the place of audience was in one of the private apartments near the bed-chamber, where only privileged ones were ever allowed to come.

"Sire," commenced the duke, "you remember the gunmaker who was before you not long since?"

"Ah—yes. The one who took my Greek's sword from him?"

"The same, sire. Have you heard from him since?"

"I had well nigh forgotten the fellow. Yes, yes—I remember him well now. He was a right stout knave."

"Aye—and a dangerous one, too, sire. A dangerous man, said the duke, with a dubious shake of the head.

"Ah—what has he done?"

"Why—he has been engaged in various robberies to my certain knowledge; and only a few evening since

he knocked down one of our holy priests and robbed him of all he had. He is at the head of a numerous band of desperadoes."

"Is it possible?"

"I know it, sire."

"I should not have believed this."

"Nor would I have believed it, sire, had I not received proofs not to be questioned. I, as is my duty, have long been anxious to ferret out this gang of robbers—"

"But I have never heard of them, Olga," interrupted Peter.

"Ah, sire, because I gave directions that you should not be troubled with the affair. But I have them now. It is only last evening that I got a clew upon them. We found them in an old building near the river, here in the Kremlin, and this same Ruric Nevel was with them. But he made his escape."

"I do remember me now that the fellow had a bold bearing and a fearless look," said the emperor, half to himself; "and if such a man turns villain there must be danger in it."

"Aye, sire—you speak truly. And now, with your order, I can apprehend the fellow at once."

"I can send and have it done, my dear Duke."

"But your officers may not find him. I know where he is, and can have him taken at once. He has several hiding-places."

"Well—then you might do the work with more advantage."

"Aye; and I can have him tried and disposed of without further trouble to you, sire."

"No, no. I wish to see him," returned the emperor. "I will give you the necessary order, and you may bring him here."

Peter then turned to his secretary, and bade him fill an order for Ruric Nevel's arrest. The stout master-at-arms looked on with a troubled countenance, and his glances toward the duke were anything but loving. He did not seem to relish the business at all, and the expression of his countenance would seem to indicate that he did not believe all that the duke had said.

However, the order was soon in the duke's possession.

"Remember," said Peter—"you must bring him before me."

"You shall be obeyed, sire."

If the emperor did not notice the strange, dark look of the duke as he turned away, the Greek did; and he fancied, too, that he knew what it meant. But he said nothing then.

Olga bowed low as he clutched the order, and having once more promised obedience, he hurried from the imperial presence. As he passed out through the wide court he walked slowly and thoughtfully, and with his head bowed; but soon he started up—his hands came together with an emphatic movement, and he moved on more quickly. He had gained the street, and approached a small court within which stood a house of entertainment, where he stopped. In a few moments more a man came out from the inn, and as soon as he had satisfied himself that the new-comer was the duke, he spoke.

"Olga—is't you?"

"Yes."

It needed but a single glance in the dim starlight to recognize the form of the hump-backed priest. He walked quickly to where the duke stood, and the two moved off together.

"Now what luck?" Savotano asked, as they gained the street once more.

"Good—as good as I could even hope," returned the duke. "I have the power for arresting the gunmaker."

"And for executing him?"

"It amounts to the same. I am ordered to bring him before the emperor; but that is easily managed."

Here the duke stopped and gazed about him, and then bending his head, so that no word could possibly pass beyond his companion's ears, he continued:

"You can call upon three of your best men, and I can furnish two from among my own servants. Early in the morning—by the time the sun is up—they must be at the gunmaker's dwelling. They must make him angry—of course, he will resist—and then kill him. It is very simple—very. They can easily dispatch him thus, and then we have only to tell the emperor that he resisted the imperial authority even unto death. So you see this is even better than it would have been had I received direct authority for his death; for then some form of trial would have been necessary, but now we have only to go to his house—provoke him to quarrel—kill him—and then tell the emperor how it happened. What think you?"

"Why," returned the priest, with a wicked chuckle, "I can only say that Master Nevel is done for—he is a dead man."

“Exactly. Nothing could be better—nothing.”

After the explanation of this fiendish scheme, the two walked on some distance in silence.

“Stop,” uttered the duke, catching his companion by the arm. “There come two persons this way. We must not meet them. Here—into this passage—quick!”

It was a narrow, dark passage leading to the next street, into which the duke dragged his companion, and here he meant to remain until the two persons had passed. The fact was, the duke did not wish to be seen with the priest at that hour in the street, and it is no matter of surprise that he should at that moment have been influenced by guilty fear. The two pedestrians came on, and passed the spot where the men stood. They were females, and one of them the priest saw in the face. The features were upturned to the starlight, and he recognized them. He caught the duke quickly and nervously by the arm.

“’Twas the countess!” he whispered.

“*Rosalind*?” gasped Olga.

“Yes—as sure as death!”

“Then come—quick!”

Savotano understood the meaning of this, and he followed the duke quickly out. At a few bounds Olga reached the females, and one of them he caught by the arm. She uttered a sharp, quick cry, and as she turned her face up she revealed the fair features of the Countess Rosalind Valдай! The priest had no need to stop the other girl, for she stopped of her own accord as soon as she found that her mistress was captured.

“Aha!” Olga uttered, when he saw that pale face.

"What now, eh? Where are you bound at this unseemly hour?"

"Oh, God!" It was all the poor girl could utter. She saw the dark face of her hated and feared guardian, and the last glimmer of hope faded from her soul.

"It is fortunate I have found you," the duke resumed, fastening his grip surely upon the maiden's arm, "for you might have fallen into difficulty else. You were bound for the imperial palace, eh?"

At first Rosalind thought of struggling for escape, but she felt the strong gripe upon her arm, and she knew that such a movement could result only in her own harm.

"Say," repeated the duke, "were you not bound for the palace?"

"Aye, proud duke, I was," the countess replied, gazing up into the man's face. "I was trying to escape from your power!"

"Aha! But come—we'll turn towards home. You'll be better off there. And this is our little Zenobie, is it?"

The attendant looked up, but she made no reply. Then Olga turned to the priest.

"Savotano, hurry off your men in the morning, and then come to me. I'll have work for you to-morrow."

And then, with a sinking, breaking heart, Rosalind Valдай was led back towards the ducal palace.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRANGE AND COMPLICATED.

Ruric Nevel dreamed that he was a great general, and that he was upon the eve of an engagement. He gained a view of the commander of the opposing army, and he saw that it was the Duke of Tula. Yet the duke had an enormous hump upon his back, and instead of the usual uniform he wore the garb of a priest. This was very strange;—at least, so ran Ruric's thoughts in the dream. Soon the engagement commenced, and the loud-mouthed artillery opened its thunder. The din was deafening and strange, and Ruric shouted in vain to his aids, for the roar of cannon drank up his words direct from his lips. Louder and more loud grew the crash, and finally Ruric started for the charge. His horse was shot under him, and with a quick leap he reached his feet.

“Ruric! Ruric! My Master!”

Slowly the youth opened his eyes, and Paul stood by him in his night-clothes. He gazed about him, and found that he had leaped from his bed, and now stood shivering upon the floor. The boy held a lighted candle in his hand.

“Don't you hear that racket at the door?” asked Paul.

“What!—ha!—there is some one knocking!”

"And have you not heard it before?"

"No."

"Why did you leap up thus?"

"I was dreaming."

"I thought 'twas the noise below. Why—they 've been making a perfect thunder of noise down there. Shall I go down?"

"Yes, go, Paul, and I will dress as soon as possible. What time is it?"

"It must be near daybreak."

And thus speaking, Paul turned and went to his own room, where he threw on an outer garment, and then he went down. At the door he found a stout man, wrapped up in furs, while close by stood a sledge with two horses attached to it. In the east the golden tints of morn were already visible.

"A gunmaker named Nevel lives here, does he not?" asked the applicant, after having first made some passing remark on the trouble he had had in starting some one up.

Paul feared that there might be something out of the way, but he dared not tell a falsehood where it could not possibly be of any use, so he answered in the affirmative.

"Then let me see him as speedily as possible."

"He is preparing to come down, sir. If you will walk in you may see him very soon."

The stranger followed the boy into the kitchen, where it was quite warm, the fire in the furnace having been burning all night. Ere long Ruric came down and the visitor started up.

"How?" said the gunmaker, starting forward and extending his hand. "Demetrius?"

"Aye, my friend," the Greek replied, with a smile. "I am an early visitor, eh?"

"I should say so; but early or late, you are welcome."

"Thank you. But we must not spend much time here now. My sledge is here at your door, and I wish you to accompany me.

"But wherefore is this?" asked the youth, in surprise. "What has happened now?"

"I'll tell you: Last night Olga, the duke, came to see the emperor. I had just been giving his majesty some exercise at the sword, so I was present at the interview. The duke wished for power to arrest you; and in explanation of the request, he stated that you were at the head of a band of robbers here in the city, and that you had already committed several robberies. I needn't tell you all he said, but he made you out to be a most unmitigated villain, and with this the emperor granted his request. Olga wished for power to execute you at once, but Peter would not go so far as that. He gave the power of arrest, but ordered the duke to bring you before him."

Ruric stood for a few moments like one confounded.

"Then he must carry me to the emperor," he said at length.

"Ah," returned Demetrius, with a dubious shake of the head, "be not too sure of that. I saw a look upon his face when he turned away that meant more than he dared to speak. As sure as fate he never means that

you shall see the emperor. I know it—I saw it in his evil eye.”

“ But will he dare disobey the order ? ”

“ Yes, for he hopes to escape by falsehood. How easy for him to swear that he had to kill you to take you.”

“ I see—I see.”

“ Then come with me.”

“ Did the emperor send you ? ”

“ No ; but I take the responsibility. I will take you to him myself. Be sure the duke’s hirelings will be here before long. Trust to me and all shall be well.”

Ruric pondered a few moments, and he saw that his friend was right.

“ Let me go and see my mother,” he said, “ and then I will go with you.”

“ But make haste,” urged the Greek, “ for the duke’s men may be here soon, and I do not wish them to see you. And—tell your mother to inform whoever may call, that she knows not where you are gone, but that you will be back at night.”

The youth nodded assent, and then went into his mother’s room, where he explained to her what had happened, and what he was about to do.

“ And how long must these things be ? ” the mother cried, gazing eagerly upon her son.

“ Not long,” returned Ruric. “ I may do much towards settling the matter to-day. But fear not, for I am now safe, and shall be until I see you again.”

The widow promised all that her son asked, and soon became assured that all was well ; but Paul was left with the duty of attending to those who might come

for Ruric, though they might see the widow if they persisted. The boy promised to tell all that asked for his master that he was gone away on business, and would not return till evening.

The mother came out before Ruric was ready to start, and her examination of the Greek's countenance seemed to be satisfactory, for the anxious look left her face, and she looked upon the visitor kindly.

As Ruric entered the sledge the dawn of day was plainly announced in the east, and the stars were paling in the sky. The Greek did not take the direct road to the Kremlin, but struck off to the westward, and so entered by the Neglina.

An hour later a party of five men drove up to the gunmaker's cot. They were dark, villainous looking men, and murder was plainly stamped upon their faces. They entered the dwelling, but they found not their prey. They stormed and swore, but to no purpose, and when they were convinced that the gunmaker was not there they went away.

An hour later still, and another party drove up to the same cot. It consisted of two men in a double sledge, one of whom was Vladimir the monk. The fat, mystic man entered the cot, and there he remained for some time. When he came out the widow and Paul accompanied him; and they all got into the sledge and drove off together.

What did it mean?

* * * * *

It was past noon. The proud duke was once more alone in his private room, and he was pacing uneasily to and fro. There was a cloud upon his brow and

trouble in his soul. His lips were firmly set, and his hands clenched. Ever and anon he muttered to himself, and when he did so his hands would work nervously and emphatically. He looked often at his watch, and often he stopped near the door and hearkened.

At length came that well-known shuffling, uncertain, cat-like tread. He threw open his door, and the dark priest glided in.

"Ha, Savotano, I've waited for you," the duke uttered, sinking into a chair, for his nervous walking had made him weary. "Now tell me the work is done. Oh, don't tell me again of failure!"

"Alas! my lord—"

"Hold, Savotano! You are not going to tell me of failure!"

"Not really a failure, my lord," the priest returned, nervously. "But our men did not find the gunmaker at home. He had gone when we got there, and no one knew where."

"No one knew? Did not his mother know?"

"No. She said he did not tell her where he was going. He only left word that he was going on business, and should not return till evening."

"By heavens! I think he has fled."

"No, my lord. I do not think so. I think he must have had business."

"But what time were you there?"

"Shortly after sunrise."

"And had he gone then?"

"Aye, he had been gone an hour."

"It looks suspicious. But the men must be there this evening. He shall not escape me now."

"There is no fear of that, my lord. I will see that he is *apprehended* as soon as he returns."

"Right, Savotano—right! And now to the other matter. I am to be married this afternoon!"

"Ah, so soon?"

"Yes; I waste no more time. What is the use?"

"None, my lord—none at all."

"Then you must remain, for the ceremony shall be performed as soon as possible."

"And does the countess know of your determination?"

"Yes, She knew it ere she rested last night. I told her she should not escape again till she could carry my name with her. By the mass, sir, she sealed her own doom! Ha, ha, ha! the Duke of Tula will have his coffers filled again. Money must come somehow, and how else so easily as this?"

"Sure enough," returned the priest, with that old coarse, wicked smile—"sure enough, my lord,—how?"

"In no way. Ho! I'll put the seal upon that budget, and stamp it—*mine*! So here you remain until I am married. To-day—until that ceremony is performed, I am not sure; but to-morrow they cannot harm me. Oh—she shall be mine then! She shall be mine, Savotano. To-day she is my wife—and to-morrow all the powers combined cannot undo the work. I have waited long enough. I have worked and schemed, and have puzzled my brain to one great purpose; and yet each step I have marked out has failed me. Damonoff lives—the gunmaker lives—the Black Monk lives but I *too*, live! Ha! *I live* Savotano! and now the work

shall be done as it might have been done at first, had I been so disposed ! ”

The duke had arisen to his feet while speaking thus, and his manner had been frantic and excited. As he ceased speaking he sank back into his chair and gazed the priest in the face. He was all iron now. Every nerve and muscle was set, and a fierce determination was in his soul.

* * * * *

There is one more scene in the ducal palace, and it goes on at the very time while the duke and his tool are together.

Vladimir the monk was in the chamber of the countess, and the fair occupant and her maid were there with him.

“And you are sure he means to make you his wife to-day ? ” said the monk, in continuation of a conversation which had been going on for some moments—“that he will have the ceremony performed whether you consent or not ? ”

“Yes, sir,” the countess murmured. She gazed into the strange man’s face a few moments after she had spoken, and then, starting quickly up, she threw herself upon her knees before him.

“Oh ! ” she cried, with her clasped hands raised before him, “can you not help me in this bitter moment ? Do not say no. Oh, I know you have some strange power—and you may help me. You cannot know the misery I suffer. Oh ! earth has no pangs more cruel ! In the whole catalogue of woes there is nothing more bitter. Sir—” and the maiden raised both hands toward heaven as she thus continued—“sooner than be

that man's wife I would with my own hand let my life-blood, were not the act a sin against my God ! But you may help me."

"Alas, lady ! I cannot assure you now."

"Oh—say not so. You can help me flee from here—you can find me some hiding-place—some place where my days can be spent in safety from this great evil."

"But how can I help you away, lady ?"

"Because you know some secret entrance to the palace. You know some secret passage, else you would not be here now."

"True," the monk replied, in a perplexed tone, "I do know such a way, for by that way I came, and by that way shall I return ; but I cannot convey you away thus. I am sorry that—"

The monk stopped here for at that moment a heavy footfall sounded without. He had started up from his seat when the door opened, and the stout duke entered. The countess uttered one low, quick cry, and sank down. She would have sunk to the floor had not Zenobie caught her and bore her to the couch.

The monk stood erect, with his arms folded across his breast, but his right hand was hidden within the bosom of his robe. The duke started back like one thunderstruck, and it was some moments ere he could gain the power of speech. He turned first as pale as death, and then the blood mounted hotly, fiercely, to his brow.

"How came you here ?" he gasped, in a hissing, frantic tone.

"To learn of your wickedness, Duke of Tula." calmly responded Vladimir.

“Ha! do you beard me in my very palace, dog? But you have ventured here once too often. As sure as there is life in me you go not hence alive!”

“Hold, Olga!” spoke the monk; and so strange and powerful was the tone that though the duke had turned towards the door, yet he stopped. “This lady tells me you mean to make her your wife? Is it so?”

“Out, accursed monk! Who gave thee right to question me?”

“Proud duke, you shall know that anon. But listen: If you force this lady to that thing you do it at your peril! You had better seek the fabled potion of the gods, and drink and be a dog, than do that thing!”

“Hold a moment, monk!” cried the duke, now nearly blind with passion. “You go not hence alive! What ho, there! Without, I say! Zenobie, pull that bell-cord! Quick! Back, monk! You pass not here alive! What ho! Without, there!”

“Beware, Olga!” spoke the monk, as calmly as before, at the same time drawing a heavy pistol from his bosom and cocking it. “I would shoot you as I would a dog! Offer one motion of impediment to my passage and you die on the instant!”

Instinctively the duke moved on one side. There was something in the look and tone of the strange man that he dared not cope with then. The monk passed out, but as soon as he was gone the duke sprang to the bell-cord and pulled it till he broke it. In a few moments more the servants came rushing in.

“Out, dogs!” the madman shouted, “and stop that monk from leaving the palace. Kill him on the spot where you find him if he dares to offer the least resist-

ance! Kill him—you have my orders, and I am alone responsible.”

Thus speaking the duke rushed from the apartment to start up more of his household. First to the gate of the court he went, but the monk was not there, nor had he been there. Then he rushed to the postern, but that was locked, and the snow was untrodden before it. He returned to the hall, and one by one the servants came back from the search.

No monk could be found!

At first Olga was tempted to believe that his servants deceived him; but he quickly set that thought aside, for he could see by their countenances that they were as much astonished as he. The search was renewed, but the strange man was not to be found. There was some wonder, and—some uneasiness.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

Pale as death sat the fair young countess in her dressing-room. She did not tremble now, for every nerve had become fixed in utter despair.

"Will you not change your dress, my mistress?" asked Zenobie, in a low, tremulous tone.

"No, no," the maiden replied; and her voice sounded strangely even in her own ear, it was so low and hollow. "Why should I dress for the sacrifice? The dumb beast may suffer garlands about its neck before being led to the heathen altar; but, alas! God has not given me a brute's ignorance to help me now. No, no, Zenobie, I will not dress for the bride."

"But the duke expects it."

"I care not. He cannot ask me to do it. He may do all he wills, for I am helpless here, but he dare not ask."

"Oh! my dear mistress," cried the faithful girl, throwing her arms about the neck of her mistress, and weeping as she did so, "would to God that I could bear this for you."

"I thank you all the same, my dearest friend," the countess replied, gazing gratefully up into her attendant's face; "but it matters not much now. I shall not suffer long. My sorrow will soon cease."

Zenobie looked inquiringly up, but she did not speak.

"God will soon take me home," the wretched maiden murmured, after a pause. "I feel the chill hand upon my heart even now, and I know that earth cannot bind my spirit long with such a curse upon it!"

Zenobie had no words of consolation more to offer, so she did all she could do. She drew the head of her mistress upon her bosom, and there she held it for a long time. She held it thus until the door of the apartment was opened and a female domestic entered.

"Lady," the new-comer said, trembling perceptibly while she spoke, "the duke bade me tell you he awaited your coming below in the hall."

She stopped here, and seemed to wait for an answer; but Rosalind did not speak.

"What answer shall I give him, lady?"

At this the countess started up, but she sank back again without speaking.

"Tell him we will come," interposed Zenobie, who saw that the announcement had taken the last power of effort from her mistress.

"Yes—yes," whispered the countess, as the messenger hesitated and gazed inquisitively into her face.

And with this the woman left the apartment.

"My dear mistress," spoke Zenobie, now calling all her power of self-control to her aid, "all means of help and escape we have tried in vain. The time has come—"

"Oh, God have mercy!" groaned the countess.

"And we must meet it, since there is no further hope. It will be better to go down at once than to arouse the bad man's anger by more delay. Were there the least glimmer of hope, we would not go; but there is not. You know what I mean."

A few moments Rosalind sat like one dead. Then she started up, with her hands clasped, and raised her eyes towards heaven. She did not speak aloud, but her lips moved, and she slowly uttered a prayer to God—and it was none the less eloquent because it was silent. Then she turned to her companion. Her lips were set and colorless, and a deathly look had overspread her whole face.

“Zenobie,” she said, in a tone which bore no feeling more than the gliding of cold, icy sound, “I am ready. Once more, before the last joy of earth departs from me, let me bless thee, and press thee to my bosom.”

She opened her arms as she spoke, and when she closed them again Zenobie was within their embrace.

“Bless you—bless you ever! God keep and guide you to the end of life, and then receive you home to Himself! Kiss me. There—I am ready now!”

The broken-hearted girl wiped the tear from her eye, and in a moment more she was as cold and passionless as before.

“Lead on, Zenobie. I shall walk without help.”

Without looking around the Moslem maiden led the way to the hall. She walked slowly, and she fancied she could hear the beating of her mistress’s heart. In the hall stood the duke with some half-dozen of his own male attendants. He took the hand of the countess as she approached him, and gazed earnestly into her face; but he did not speak. He led her towards one of the drawing-rooms, and when they entered there they found the hump-backed priest already in waiting. Rosalind came well-nigh fainting when she saw this miserable villain ready for his work. She knew now that the priest was like the master.

"You see, my dear Countess," spoke the duke, in a low, hypocritical tone, "that we have all prepared. I trust we shall have no trouble before this holy man."

This last sentence was spoken in a threatening tone, but it had no effect upon Rosalind. She hardly heard the words he spoke.

"Come, father," said Olga, turning now to the priest. "We are ready."

Savotano moved forward and mumbled a Latin prayer. Then he looked upon the twain before him, and directed them to kneel.

"No! no! no!" gasped the fair countess, trembling for the first time. "I cannot do that!"

"Kneel!" hissed the duke, between his clenched teeth. And as he spoke he grasped the maiden more firmly by the arm and forced her down. She uttered a quick cry of pain as she felt the unmerciful grip, but she could not resist the strong arm of her persecutor.

"Now go on!" the duke cried as he held the maiden down. "Go on, Savotano, and let the business be done as soon as possible."

"Hold!"

It was a voice of thunder which spoke thus, and it came from the door. The duke started to his feet, and beheld Ruric Nevel, the gunmaker, approaching the spot. But the youth came not alone. Behind him came the huge bulk of Vladimir the monk. And more still—back of the monk came the widow, Claudia Nevel, and the boy Paul. And then there was, besides all this, a heavy tramp of feet in the hall, and the clang of steel.

"Hold! Stop this accursed mockery!" Ruric shouted, as he strode up the apartment.

"Miserable dog!" gasped the duke, mad and frantic with rage, "how dare you come hither?"

"Look you, proud duke," the monk interposed, coming quickly forward, "I am at the bottom of all this. *I* have come to stop this foul work!"

Rosalind had started to her feet when she first heard Ruric's voice; and now, as the monk spoke, a ray of hope darted to her soul, and with a quick bound she reached her lover's side.

"Ruric! Ruric!" It was all she could say; and with a gushing, whelming flood of tears she pillowed her head upon his bosom, and his stout arms were wound fondly about her.

"Fear not," he whispered, "for oh! Rosalind, thou art safe now."

The mad duke saw the movement, and with a bitter curse he started towards them.

"Now by the living gods!"-he shouted, with his fists clenched and his eyes flashing fire, "you have come to your death! What, ho, there!—Without! Slaves, where are you?"

In a moment more the side door was thrown open, and a dozen of the duke's servants came rushing in.

"Ha!" Olga cried, "you are in time! Seize these dogs! Kill them on the spot if they offer one act of resistance. At them now! Down with the dogs!"

"HOLD!" It was Vladimir who spoke, and every arm dropped as they heard that voice. It was different from the voice they had heard the fat monk use before.

The duke started as though a thunderbolt had burst at his feet.

"Who art thou?" he gasped, staggering further back.

“Olga—Duke of Tula”—spoke the monk, in tones which sounded strange for him, because they were so different from those he had been wont to use, “I am thy master!”

As he spoke he threw open the long black robe which enveloped his person, and cast it upon the floor at his feet, and there let it lay, a huge pile of wadding and stuffing! The vast rotundity of his person was gone, and the strange man now stood in his own fair form. His chin—that prominent chin—was no more hidden, and he was but a small man—not much larger than the boy Paul who stood near him. Next he placed his hand to his head and tore away the tight skull-cap, and the ring of gray hair came away with it, leaving a cluster of glossy hair floating down over the neck and shoulders!

“*It is the EMPEROR!*” gasped Savatano, staggering back.

“Aye!” cried Peter, turning his darkly-flashing eyes upon the staggering duke, “I am your Emperor. Paul, go and call the guard.”

The boy hastened from the palace, and when he returned he was followed by a party of the Imperial guard.

“Mercy! mercy! sire!” gasped the duke, sinking down on his knees.

But the emperor answered him not. He only turned to his guard and bade them secure the duke and the foul priest.

Rosalind Valдай gazed upon the transformed man until the strange truth worked its way to her struggling mind, and then she turned once more to Ruric. She

gazed up into his face, and she saw the holy smile which rested there. The joyful truth came to her now, and with one long, low cry of frantic hope and bliss she sank upon her noble lover's bosom. She could not speak—she could only cling closely and more close to her loved protector, and with her head pillowed on his breast close by the heart that beat for her, she wept away all the grief of her opened soul.

“Olga,” spoke the emperor, after the nobleman had been firmly bound, “your race of iniquity is run.”

“No, no, sire,” the duke cried, in humble, supplicating tones, “say not so. In this single thing I may have been wrong, but let my mad, consuming love be some palliation for my offence. Oh! you will not crush me with public shame for this. You will not cast from you one who loves you well.”

“Oh, miserable man!” said Peter, with a look of utter contempt upon the base wretch, “add not perjury to your already accumulated crimes. Hark you: Some months since I knew there was a conspiracy in my capital, and I knew there was much of evil, too, which was never reported to me. I resolved to ferret it out, and to that end I meant to mingle among my people without their knowing me. So I had that robe made, and so stuffed and wadded that I could even hide my chin in the seeming fat. I assumed the garb, and my own master-at-arms did not at first know me. Once in a while I made my page assume the garb, and be seen in it about the city, and thus all thought of suspecting me was cut off. I have been at work, Olga, and I have found out all I sought. It was mere accident that threw me in the way of this young gunmaker, and it was by

accident, too, that I overheard the Count Damonoff and his companion discussing the subject of their mission to the gunmaker's shop. Of course, I followed that scheme up, and I should have snatched our fair young countess from your grasp ere this had I not been desirous of arriving at another point first. Perhaps you know that the Princess Sophia and the Minister Galitzin have planned a grand overturn of my throne. Ah, you tremble! And now, my noble duke," the emperor continued, in a deeper tone, "I have learned of your own guilt in that affair. O! you love me, do you? But I know you now. Two of your poor tools are in my hands. They are named Totma and Viska. They have made a full confession, and I know all your villainies. I know what you have planned against this noble countess, and against her noble lover; I know what you planned against the Count Damonoff; and I know, too, what you have planned against the emperor. Not a word, sir! You are the Duke of Tula no more. A more worthy man wears the ducal coronet from this hour. Ruric Nevel shall assume the station you have disgraced, and I know he will ennoble it once more."

As Peter ceased speaking he waved his hand to his officers, and they bore the prisoners from the room. The priest said not a word, but Olga cursed loudly and bitterly.

When the dark villains had gone, Peter stepped forward and took Rosalind's hand. There was a tear in his bright eye, and his nether lip trembled.

"Fair cousin," he said, in a low, soft tone, "I could not promise thee that thou shouldst not wed with the Duke of Tula, for I had even then planned that you

should do that thing. But it will not be very hard, will it?"

The countess gazed up, and a murmur of thanks was upon her lips; but the gushing flood started forth anew and she could only look the joyful blessings she could not speak. Peter imprinted a kiss upon her pure brow, and then gave her hand to Ruric, and as he did so he said, with a warm smile:

"You must be her guardian hereafter, and should you tire of the duty your emperor will be ever ready to grant her the asylum she needs."

* * * * *

A week had passed away, from the time of the strange scene just recorded. The former duke, Olga, had been convicted of treason, and was now on his way to the eternal wilds of Siberia. But let me say here: He never reached the land of his banishment. His proud heart broke on the road, and he died, unknown and uncared for, in a peasant's cot among the rugged mountains of Uralia. He had begged of the officer who guarded him not to tell his station, and the peasants supposed they were burying a common traveler when they laid away the mortal remains of Olga in the cold grave they had prepared.

Savotano, the hump-backed priest, was executed as a common murderer, while his companions in crime were punished as their various degrees of guilt demanded.

And now comes the closing scene.

Within the largest apartment of the ducal palace were assembled a brilliant company, and the emperor himself was master of the ceremonies.

Ruric Nevel, the Gunmaker of Moscow, knelt at the

emperor's feet ; and Peter drew his sword and laid the glittering blade upon Ruric's shoulders. And as he did so he said :

“ Arise, Sir Ruric, Duke of Tula, and receive thy just title and bonded instruments.”

The youth arose, pale and trembling with the strange excitement of the moment, and then the emperor handed him a broad parchment roll, with its heavy seals and vignette bearing the arms of the dukedom.

“ Now,” cried Peter, whose brow was flushed with the joy he himself was making, “ let the rest of the work go on. Come, holy father, we need your help to perform the rest of the ceremony.”

Ruric was pale no longer. As he felt the warm hand of Rosalind trembling within his own the rich blood mounted to his brow and temples, and in his dark eyes the strange love-light danced like reflected sunbeams.

The word was spoken—the bond of union was made, and after all, Rosalind Valdai had become Duchess of Tula. The widowed mother was the first to bless them—and the emperor came next. Then came Paul and Zenobie, hand in hand.

“ Aha,” spoke the happy duchess, as she caught the new light of Zenobie's eye, and then turned to the glowing face of Paul, “ you are playing at the game of love.”

“ You will not object,” whispered the fair girl, hiding her face upon the bosom of her mistress.

“ No, no, Zenobie.”

“ And you, my master,” spoke Paul, gazing eagerly into Ruric's face, “ you will not say nay.”

“ No, no, my noble Paul. If you can win her you may have my consent.”

She was won already.

There was yet one more to come. Conrad, Count Damonoff, somewhat pale and weak, but yet on the sure road to health, moved slowly forward and took the hand of the joyous bride. Then he reached forth the other hand and took the palm of Ruric, and as he thus held both their hands, he said :

“ My lord and lady—and, I must say, my best friend—let this moment atone for all of darkness between us in the past. Be you happy both, and may God bless you. Let me be accounted among your friends, and let the future prove how grateful I can be.”

“ Aye,” cried Ruric, grasping the count’s hand more firmly, “ let the future show how grateful we can all be for the blessings of this hour ; and while we look to God for help we will not fail to remember in our prayers the author of our joys—our noble emperor—Peter of Russia !”

And so closed the scene as it should—with one long, loud shout of :

“ God bless our emperor !”

Peter never forgot that moment. In the long years thereafter, when he sometimes let the clouds of passion settle upon his soul, he remembered that scene and that shout. It was one of the bright spots in the memory of his youth which he cherished always.

THE END.





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